CASUAL GAMES ASSOCIATION

Summer 2008

casual connect magazine

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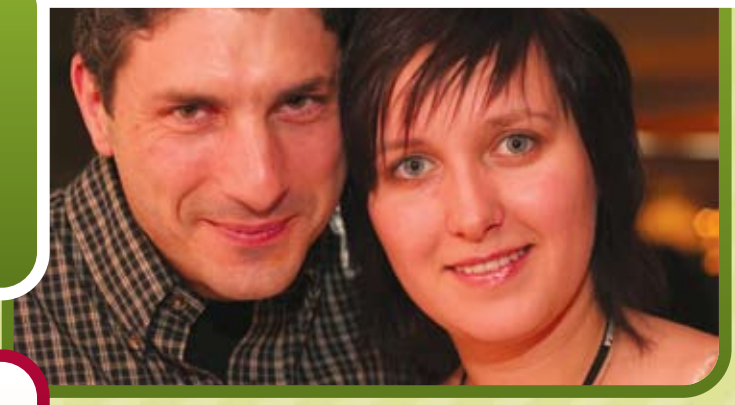

Conference Highlights:

- Meet with affordable development studios
- Explore rapidly expanding distribution markets
- Find out about investment opportunities
- Hear firsthand stories of Top 10 successes and localization
- Attend great parties

More than 500 industry professionals attended Casual Connect Kyiv 2007. The event's extraordinary success was a testament to the strength of the casual games industry in Eastern Europe and Russia. Since last year, the casual games industry in Eastern Europe and Russia has grown by leaps and bounds, and the quality of game development over the last year is manifest by the shear number of hit games flowing from the region. Casual Connect Kyiv has all the excitement of a new and emerging market with an atmosphere ripe with business opportunity for developers and publishers from all over the globe. Don't miss the premiere event in Eastern Europe dedicated to casual games!

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About the Cover

Jen Zee is the Concept Artist/Flash Programmer for Gaia Interactive in San Jose, California. For GaiaOnline.com, an interactive virtual world, Jen conceptualizes and illustrates environments for millions of monthly members ("Gaians") to inhabit. Gaia is currently building a casual MMO, and Jen is texturing and creating visual effects for that MMO world.

With a background in Informatics and Mathematics from the University of Washington, Jen is a self-taught artist who learned graphic design through trial and error. Her influences and inspiration in graphic design have been the beautiful sights of the Pacific Northwest, and a healthy exposure to such talented artists as Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Alphonse Mucha, Yoji Shinkawa, and Ayami Kojima.

Jen was drawn to video games because they allow audiences to experience her vivid imagination firsthand: "As an artist, the ability to share the world inside your mind through an immersive and interactive platform is just too attractive. Plus I find the video games industry to be a perfect blend of both the artistic and the technological."

For the cover in this edition of Casual Connect, Jen drew her inspiration from the Gaia virtual landscape: "It is a world full of rich characters, exciting adventures, and intriguing surprises. I chose the character, Blaze, to feature in this portrait because she is both powerful and graceful. She embodies the energy within the world of Gaia, and also the spirit of our passionate community, which I hoped to convey in this image."

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Letter from the Director

Preparing for the Dorky Years Ahead

So there we were, just minding our own business, and all of a sudden *everything* is casual. It's gotten so bad, in fact, that I saw where someone said that *World of Warcraft* was more successful than *EverQuest* because *WoW* is somehow "more casual." Wow indeed.

Naturally, I'm flattered by such comparisons, because it's evidence that we have done our job in spreading the word that the casual games industry is a healthy, vibrant, exciting (and lucrative) place to be. When even the most successful core games are straining to be thought of as casual, we must be doing something right.

Of course, we can't be satisfied with what we've become because there is so much left to do. We're still part of a very young industry, one which has yet to reach even adolescence. At the risk of straining a metaphor, think about how dorky and confused you were as a young, barely-pubescent teenager. Is there anyone more likely than an eighth-grader to do something unambiguously stupid? Well, as an industry, eighth grade is still a few years away. It's a very scary thought, isn't it?

While we still have some time left as the adorable toddler, may I suggest that we continue to do the kinds of things that have made us the envy of the game world? Specifically, that means continuing to make new and exciting games, of course, but it's so much more than that. We need to be equally clever about all aspects of our business if we expect to continue to grow.

As a matter of fact, I'd go so far as to say that *innovation*, more than any other thing, has been at the heart of our success to this point. And it doesn't take a post-graduate degree to realize that innovation will also be the key to making it through the next few years without ruining what we have so far.

That's why we have made a particular point of integrating innovation into our conferences. Our purpose is not to tell you to how to innovate. Rather we're hoping to motivate you through good old-fashioned nagging to continuously seek new and better ways of doing what you do. Through research, case studies, and more than a few hallway conversations, we hope to inspire something so brilliant that it's what everyone's talking about a year from now.

Please consider this just another push intended to inspire you to do something no one else has thought of but which everyone will want to imitate. It's only through such fresh thinking that we will avoid losing our friends by going all dorky and stupid in the next few years.

Jessica

Jessica Tams

> "Is there anyone more likely than an eighth-grader to do something unambiguously stupid? Well, as an industry, eighth grade is still a few years away. It's a very scary thought, isn't it?"

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Returning to the Basics of Effective Communication

Jessica Tams

Think how much easier work would be if we didn't have to deal with corporate hierarchies and office politics. Unfortunately, hierarchies and politics are one of the great realities of life—even (alas) within the ever-expanding world of casual games. Whether you work in a two-person start-up or in a Fortune 500 mega-company, your success will depend largely on your ability to communicate effectively with others and achieve some level of common understanding.

So it is that when we came upon an essay from Partick Bulman, a student at DigiPen, we were reminded of the importance of sticking to the basics. Thus we bring a brief summary of Patrick's lessons from his student projects, condensed and expanded into an eight-step process with the easy-to-remember acronym of HLRFFHCD.

1. *Honesty*—Start each interaction with an effort to be honest. Once you lose your credibility you will have lost your listener as well.
2. *Listen*—Listening to your audience is the only way to truly know your message will hit the mark.[1]
3. *Relate*—Communication is a two-way exchange. Attempting to merely appease, command or encourage may be a short-term fix, but will fall short of validating and addressing concerns.
4. *Focus*—Focus on the problem at hand, not on the person.[2]
5. *Friendly*—Use humor to let everyone know they are on the same team.
6. *Humility*—No matter what you may think, you don't know everything. Keep your mind open so you can recognize the best solution.
7. *Confidence*—For those who need no help with humility, confidence is the most challenging roadblock and can prohibit the execution of the other basics. It is important to push all the fears, anxiety and problems aside and focus on the problem at hand.
8. *Discipline*—While the basics of communication is something everyone experiences early in life, it takes discipline to develop these communication skills.

[1] For more information about proper brainstorming, see David Nixon's 2007 articles about brainstorming.

[2] For more about focusing on the problem at hand, see Ernie Ramirez and Ion Hardie of Reflexive Entertainment's article in the Winter 2007 issue of Casual Connect Magazine "Don't Go Broke: An Analysis of Sunk Cost"

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Working Nowhere and Everywhere

The Zen of Running a Mobile, Virtual Game Development Studio

Christopher Natsuume

Boomzap is a completely virtual studio. We have no physical office, and everyone works from home on a flexible schedule. Our team includes about a dozen full-time, exclusive contractors in America, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Russia, and the Philippines. Some of our core team members have never met in person, and most of them see each other about once a year. Even more confusing, many of our staff members live very mobile lives: For instance, I split my time between Seattle, Singapore, and Yokohama. We have been doing this successfully since 2005.

I get a lot of questions about how we make all of this work, and I would like to share that with you. Although this article will likely be of most use to other small, outsource-heavy studios like ours, managers in larger traditional studios may find some useful information here as well. But first, I'd like to explain why we do business the way we do, and what the benefits of a work-from-home, distributed business model are:

- *Access to the Best Developers in the World:* We can hire anyone anywhere, and not worry about relocation, visas, etc. And our employees don't have to uproot and leave their communities to work with us. In fact, we have people happily working for us hundreds of miles from the nearest game studio, in places other game developers would not think of living.
- *Lower Labor Costs + Cost of Living Adjustments = Happy Developers:* While wages in Asia are not as low as many North American developers would hope, our staff costs are certainly competitive. But for us, instead of seeing this as a chance to get dirt cheap labor, we see it as a chance to create a competitive advantage in our development environment. Rather than adjusting our salary rates down in those countries where we could get away with it, we peg all of our company compensation to Singapore wages, regardless of location. While this policy may not be best for developers in the US or UK, it makes our staff in places like Russia, Malaysia, and the Philippines some of the best paid developers in their local communities. This allows us to hire the absolute best in those regions—and keep them very happy.
- *Lower Support/Overhead Costs:* We don't pay for office space, computers, electricity, coffee machines—or even paper clips. We do pay a little more to our developers to make sure they can afford the equipment they need, but come on—they are game developers; they are going to have the best machines they can afford at home whether we pay for it or not. We just avoid unnecessarily duplicating that cost at the office, and let them put that savings in their pockets as compensation.
- *Freedom to Efficiently Mix Personal and Professional Time:* Our model allows everyone in the company to adjust their work schedules to mix with their personal schedules in the most efficient manner for them. This not only saves time that might otherwise be wasted on commuting (for example), it also allows our staff to do things that they couldn't easily do in a more traditional office—like go to school part time, teach a class, or whatever. The value of that freedom—and the happiness it creates—cannot be overstated. It points out that the benefits of working for an organization like ours extend far beyond time and money.
- *Work/Life Balance + $$$ = Loyal and Dedicated Staff:* To be clear, the end effect of this is that our staff loves working for Boomzap. Any manager knows that retaining good staff is one of the keys to growth, and our structure not only allows us to pick the best staff from around the world, it helps us retain them. In fact, since 2005 we have not had a single staff member leave voluntarily.

Sounds like a pretty good deal, right? Well, it is. But the trick is that you can't run a virtually-distributed studio like this in the same way you run a more traditional studio. While there isn't enough space to explain all of our management strategies in detail, let me share with you our Top 10 strategies for running a virtual development studio. To be clear, this is what works for us, and depending on your team, pipeline, and structure, these suggestions may or may not work for you. So judge and use accordingly.

#1: We Don't Track Hours—Ever

The #1 question I get about managing Boomzap is: "How do you know if they are working or not?" That's simple: I don't care. I know how much work a professional developer should get done in about 40 hours a week. I assign that work every Monday, and I expect it to be done by the end of the week. If it is, I don't care how long it took them to do. If it's not, they work through the weekend to make it happen. In point of fact, I hope they are doing it in less than 40 hours, and using the rest to do…whatever else makes them happy.

The economics of this are simple: If you want to reward the staff for working quickly, you can't make "hours worked" a constant, because then only quality and quantity remain variable. In a traditional situation

The #1 question I get about managing Boomzap is: "How do you know if they are working or not?" That's simple: I don't care.

where "hours worked" is a constant, the reward for working quickly and efficiently is just getting more work. Worse yet, in that traditional model you end up offloading work from crappy workers to top workers since the top workers are going to be chewing through more tasks in the same time. Thus, you inadvertently create a "do less work" reward for crappy workers while punishing the good ones in direct proportion to their efficiency. That sucks.

Instead, at Boomzap we hold quantity and quality as a constant, and allow the staff to use time as an adjustable variable: They have a set task list and a minimum standard bar, and they set their own schedules for completing their work. If they can get good work done faster, their reward is that they get the rest of the time off, and if they can't, they will quickly find that they are working a lot of weekends. In this model, inefficient workers self-select for removal from the team, as they will end up working a lot of overtime (and probably leave). At the same time, efficient workers find themselves with more free time—in direct proportion to their efficiency—and free time is a form of additional compensation. Having your best workers compensated daily results in good juju.

#2: We Do Daily Builds

In a studio where you can't just walk the halls, go see what people are working on, and give them input, it is critical that you have a mechanism for checking what people are doing that gets them the feedback they need on a daily basis. To solve this, we have a super strict policy on daily builds. At the end of every day, there is a new build of the game with all new art and design assets included. We judge the staff by this, and nothing else. At least 90% of my communication to the staff is based on direct feedback on the daily build. I make sure the staff gets this feedback every day so that they know if they are going in the right direction. This process of daily builds and reviews is the lifeblood of our company. When it breaks down, the projects break down.

#3: We Mix Full-time Contractors with Project-based Contracted Specialists

There is no point in tying up your best resources with work that could be done perfectly well by more junior staff, or work that could be done faster or better by specialists. The trouble is that keeping junior staff or specialists on permanent salary is expensive. So what we do is keep

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senior generalists on staff to create the structure and core design of the game, and then we outsource the bulk asset production to specialists and managed studios that we hire on task-based contracts. Since more than half of the people working on Boomzap projects at any time are these one-off specialist contractors, we can interchange about half of our total game development force at any time depending on our needs—or scale back to less than half our team without laying anyone off. This is hugely powerful in controlling cash flow.

The key is that we're not outsourcing so that we can pay our outsource partners less. In fact, some of our contractors are much more expensive than our core staff. We're outsourcing to move the risk of idle time out of our studio. For instance, we outsource all web work, all sound, and all bulk production of hand-painted backgrounds and portraits. This is all work that specialists can do quickly to a high level of quality, and work that we only need for certain stages of production. We pay more for them when we use them, but we make that back in savings by "firing them" when we don't need them.

#4: We Hire Full-time Staff Primarily Based on Character

Our model is great for mature, motivated staff capable of high levels of self-discipline. Sadly, there are a lot of great programmers, artists, and designers out there who don't have the personality to work from home on their own schedule effectively. You have to be very careful to test for this, and not hire those people.

We do this by having a full-month test followed by a three-month probation period before anyone enters the studio—even developers we know well. The month test is skill-based and answers the core questions about whether one is capable of doing the work or not. The three-month probation is personality-based, and answers questions about self-management abilities. In the few cases where we shortened that three-month

Ten Essential Tools for a Virtual Studio

These are some actual tools we use in our studio to help support our virtual development environment. This is not a sales pitch for any of these products, but they are working well for us as we operate a studio in which anyone, including the founders, can be anywhere in the world for essentially any length of time. You may have better ideas, but this is what works for us:

1) **CVS:** If you aren't using some kind of online source control and backup system, it's just a matter of time before you will deal with some HD-crash-induced or file-swapping nightmare scenario that will cost weeks or months of manpower. While this is true for any studio, the odds of file management disasters are much higher in a virtual model. Which software you use is unimportant, but you really should be using something. We use CVS, but that's just a personal preference from our technical director. Whichever one works for you is fine.

2) **Basecamp:** A nifty online team collaboration tool that we use for our projects. A cheap $25-a-month subscription gives us the ability to create as many project groups as we need, giving our publishing partners direct access to our daily project management and creating a single record of all design/production conversations. For things like posting the daily builds/notes, this is simply invaluable. The best part of it is that it can be configured to send email out when messages are posted, and you can reply directly to messages in your mail client and have them posted to Basecamp without opening a browser. Very cool.

3) **MSN Messenger:** Our studio lives and breathes on MSN. We require all staff to be online and on MSN when they are working. In addition, they must set it to "auto-select away" when they are AFK so we know when they are available during the day to talk. We also ask them to set the "personal note" to let us know what they are up to. So if they go to the doctor, they add "at doctor until 3:00," or if they are working on a particular part of a project they might add something like "drawing backgrounds." Now everyone knows what everyone is doing without anyone needing to bother anyone. Also, if people want to be left alone, they set their MSN to busy. We have a strict "don't bug busy workers unless it's an emergency" rule, so people who want to really concentrate on their coding without constant interruption can keep focused, but they are still available if we have some kind of serious issue that's stopping other workers.

4) **SkypeIn and SkypeOut:** Aside from the free Skype-to-Skype calls we do between staff regularly, SkypeOut will let you call a real phone anywhere in the world from any internet connected computer. With a decent headset the connection is usually better than a cell phone, and at two cents a minute, its darn near free. Better yet, you can set up a SkypeIn number that lets people call your Skype account as though they were making a local call. We have ours set up in Seattle, since most of the distributors we work with are there, and dialing a 206 number makes them feel warm and fuzzy. Better yet, you can have your SkypeIn calls forwarded to any phone anywhere, including your cell phone. And it has voice mail! The end effect? People in the states can call you for free at the same number, regardless of where you are in the world, and you can call anywhere for two cents a minute. There—your telecommunication problems are over.

5) **Earth Class Mail:** How do you keep publishers from sending checks and contracts to the wrong address? First of all, push them to do everything electronically. Automated Clearing House (ACH) is free, and pretty much any contract can be scanned and PDF-converted. As

(continued on page 15)

period, we regretted it. We have even started lengthening that period for people who we don't actually know personally.

The bottom line here is that if you are going to have people working within this model, recognize up front that some people—including some great people—just won't work out. But for those who are independent and self-motivated, our model works very, very well.

A side note on this: some people have misinterpreted this issue to mean that virtual studios cannot hire young or inexperienced developers. We categorically disagree. Some of our best workers are young, highly-motivated interns, and some of the people that didn't work out were highly-trained professionals who had long since gotten used to the old way of doing things in a game studio and were unable to adapt. The issue here is less about experience and more about motivation and personality.

#5: We Delegate Authority to a Project-based "Confederation" Structure

Another question I get often about the Boomzap structure is: "How do you manage all of those people when you can't meet with them or talk to them?" Which is just another way for a producer to ask: "How do you get everyone on the staff to do *exactly* what you want?" The answer to that is simple: We don't. Everyone in the company is assigned to a specific project. They know what project they are working on, and within that project they have enormous freedom and power. Our designs are very high-level by design, as are our tasks. We don't micromanage our staff—not just because we hate micromanagement, but because doing that by email is prohibitively time-consuming. Instead, we create small groups of three-to-four people that are empowered to go make these games on their own. We manage them very loosely and give them the freedom to make their own decisions.

What we end up with is a confederation of independent projects as opposed to the more centralized structure of many other studios. Each team has the independence and authority to make large changes to the design and product without having to check with the "central powers"—and as a result, the central overhead becomes much smaller. To be clear, this works great in a system with strong project teams. In a system with weak teams that need more oversight, this system would likely fail. So knowing your staff capabilities is key.

That being said, it is important to note that key to doing this well is being able to accept good work you didn't expect. All too often studios spend a lot of time chasing a single vision-holder's dream for a project, and they end up in an endless cycle of revisions trying to perfect that vision. The trick to delegation and empowerment is being able to look at work that is not completely what you expected and/or wanted and objectively judge whether it is good work. Doing so has two great effects: 1) Your staff will really feel empowered when they see that the work they are doing gets put in the game without constantly being retooled to fit someone else's vision; and 2) Sometimes you'll get stuff that is actually better than what you had in mind.

Remember, delegation is not just the delegation of work, it is the delegation of responsibility. If you want a team to truly start taking some responsibility for their work, you cannot constantly undermine their efforts by forcing them to revise work just because it's not what you would have done. "Is this what I wanted?" is not the question. You're better off asking: "Is this something the customer would enjoy?"

#6: We Hire Managers Who Can Actually Do Things

One of the great benefits of our model is that it's impossible to hide workers who aren't contributing. Middle managers who lurk in the corners of larger studios "optimizing procedures" and "facilitating meetings" don't actually have anything to do in a virtual business model. And we haven't missed them a bit. Everyone on the team, the founders included, do real live production tasks like scripting, testing, and level design. Because the only way we can judge the staff is by assets produced and placed in the build, the incentive to actually produce things is pretty overpowering. Better yet, because our managers are actually forced to work intimately with the technology, they are more in tune with what the rest of the staff is doing, and can better judge the time required for tasks, etc. This is all to the good.

Ten Essential Tools *(continued)*

for the few Luddites who feel the need to write checks and send snail mail, set up a mailbox at Earth Class Mail. They'll scan the envelope of any incoming mail, and send you an email about it. You can then forward it, shred it, or have them open and scan it for you – all from a web browser. It's not free, but for the few mails you have to get, it's pretty cheap. They have sites around the states (ours is in Seattle, perpetuating the pleasant illusion that we have a Seattle office). Be careful, though: When you set this up, choose the non-PO-box option, because sometimes you'll deal with people or services that won't deliver to a PO Box.

6) **MyFax:** If you have a scanner there is no reason on earth to have a fax machine. Set up an account at MyFax, and have all of your faxes delivered to your email. It's simple, clean, and dirt cheap. And more importantly, you end up with a permanent, US-based, toll-free fax number that never changes, regardless of where you go.

7) **PayPal:** I don't need to tell you that if you need to pay people internationally, PayPal is the only way to go. We use this for all of our contractors in the US and Europe, and not only does it get them paid immediately, it creates a great record of all payments out. Also, since you can use a number of different solutions for paying into your PayPal account, you can play with this to create short-term credit for cash-crunch situations at relatively low cost.

8) **Washington Mutual:** While PayPal is the optimal solution for paying overseas contractors, some places like Malaysia and the Philippines have trouble with PayPal. Luckily, Washington Mutual allows unlimited free wire transfers from a personal account. Every month I transfer the company payroll into my personal account, and pay all of our non-PayPal-payable staff from there through wire transfer. Better yet, I set up all of the wire transfers as recurring, so I don't even go to the bank, I just send them an email with a list of monthly transfers, and the next morning it's done. Additionally, I have my US-based accountant on the access list to the business account, so if I need to set up additional transfers on the account, my accountant can do that for me while I am overseas.

9) **Your Mailing List Provider:** If you are running a casual game studio, you're going to be sending a lot of emails. There are a lot of solutions, but cost for value, we've had pretty good luck with YMLP.com. It has good tools for importing addresses from various sources and collecting addresses from our website. Most importantly, you can get to your entire mailing list from anywhere, without even needing access to your laptop. It's also useful when you are sharing mailing responsibilities, so you can have different people working with your mailing list without anyone swapping files, and with everyone being able to see a clear record of what was sent when.

10) **Portable Equipment:** Last but not least, make sure when you are buying equipment, that you consider portability. My home work station is an Acer laptop with internal camera and a small second flat-screen monitor with a folding base. I also have a portable USB-powered flatbed scanner, a mini-printer, and a headset for Skyping. The whole lot of it fits in a single carry-on suitcase (though I am not a popular guy at the security stations at airports!). I can pack my entire "development studio" in about 3 minutes and take it anywhere. My office is anywhere there is an Internet connection and a table. A note: Try to buy only peripherals that power off the USB. This is super useful when traveling overseas, allowing you to essentially use your laptop as a power converter for everything else.

Working Nowhere and Everywhere

The Zen of Running a Mobile, Virtual Game Development Studio

#7: We Depend on the Three P's: PowerPoint, Prototypes, Photoshop

I hope I am not the first person to tell you this, but nobody reads design documents. In fact, when working at larger studios, I made a habit of inserting the line "I will pay $5 to anyone who reads this sentence" into the center of any document over 50 pages. In 10 years of development nobody ever asked for their money. That's a true story. Problematically, the industry has solved this problem by holding meetings. Lots of meetings. Since we can't do that, we have to find a different path.

For starters, we do the initial design for a game by using short PowerPoint presentations full of diagrams, scanned-in drawings, references from other games, and Google images. (That's right: Not a Word document.) The PowerPoint is generally a mockup of every major screen in the game—with minimal text callouts—describing what the game will look like and how it will play. Next, we let the programmers build a rough prototype version of the design using a bunch of grey boxes and placeholder art cut from the PowerPoint slides. When this is playable, we have something to reference in our notes and MSN discussions. The prototype and a daily sheet of notes referencing it and suggesting changes becomes the "design document." When we finally have the prototype really fun and playable, the artists take screenshots of the demo and attack them in Photoshop, creating mockups of the final screens as they will look to the player.

When we have all of that, we go into full production. Usually someone will sit down with the PowerPoint and the prototype and create a series of simple lists that defines the tasks to be done to complete the production of the game—which is as close to a design document as most of our games ever get. Most of our games have shipped with less than 20 pages of documentation, and we still wonder if that's too much.

#8: We Use "Producer-Programmers"

Another powerful secret to our development is that every project is run by a "producer programmer"—a highly skilled programmer who not only writes the core game code for the game, but who oversees the actual production of all assets for the game. We build our teams like this for a couple of reasons, the most important of which is that the producer working with the artists and sound designers on the project is the actual person adding those assets to the game. This removes many steps of conversation in the team and solves a lot of unnecessary communication issues. Additionally, it allows the producer to directly test and prototype new ideas—without the communication cycle of a producer explaining and a programmer interpreting that explanation.

#9: We Create An "Idiot-proof" Pipeline

Development studios often spend a lot of "communication time" trying to help artists, designers, and musicians get their work into a game. Because we can't have two or three people sitting at a desk sorting out these problems, and because expecting our programmers to document labor intensive pipeline processes is both wasteful and naïve (as anyone who has ever asked indie programmers to write documentation knows!), we go to great lengths to make the tools for driving the assets into the game as simple as possible.

Our biggest tool for this is Excel, which we use to generate any script in the game including sprite lists, sound files, level design variables, object variables, localization strings, etc. The Excel sheets have a big EXPORT button that spits out a script, and nobody has the ability to break anything in script. Remember, automation means that all errors are systematic errors, and those are easier to both find and fix. And because anyone can read an Excel sheet and fill in variables, most people can figure out how to get their assets into the game without ever talking to a programmer.

Our level design tools are similarly simple. They are all WYSIWYG mouse-driven editors that are directly accessible from within the game engine—which allows our designers to get in and effectively build and test levels within a few minutes. Because the producer who defines what datasets are going to be manipulated in the game is also the one making the export sheets and editor, this process ensures a high level of idiot-proofing.

#10: We Hire Only Technical Artists

Finally, we don't actually have very many artists on full-time staff. We outsource most of the bulk art creation, especially the creation of assets like decals, backgrounds, portraits, and story art. All of this can be done quickly and efficiently by outsourced teams and returned to us in simple files that can be dropped into place with minimal integration work. The artists on staff are technical artists who handle things that require a deeper knowledge of our tools and technology—things like fonts, animated objects, particles, and user interface. This saves us the cost of keeping specialized concept artists on staff, but also protects us from the lost efficiency that would come from training contract workers to create assets according to a complex technical specification.

Conclusion

I don't pretend that our approach to development would work for everybody, but I can tell you this: It works very well for us. I hope this is useful to you, and hope even more that you'll contact me with your thoughts and suggestions of how you have tackled similar problems in your own studio.

Christopher Natsuume has been in the games industry since 1994. He has worked on games for PC, Xbox, PlayStation 2, and most recently he has focused his efforts on online casual games. He is currently the Creative Director and co-founder of Boomzap, a leading casual game developer. He holds a BA from the University of Texas at Austin and an MBA at the University of Washington, Seattle. Christopher can be reached at christopher.natsuume@casualconnect.org.

Language Barriers, Culture Gaps, and Time Warps

Challenges Managing Globally Diverse Virtual Teams

David Nixon

Regular…communication between…teams is…not…all…that… necessary…to success.

Do you agree? No!? Let me restate:

Complete communication…is…not…planning ahead.

You still don't agree? Really!? Here now, I thought I was stating the obvious. I'm shocked! Let me try one more time.

Complete…teams…between…distance …high bandwidth…difficult…success.

You say you don't understand? OK—now you're just messing with me, I can tell. I'll slow down and be perfectly clear. Then hopefully, we'll be on the same page and can move on:

Regular**, clear, complete **communication between** remote **teams is** the most critical aspect of success in managing projects from a distance. **Not** planning ahead to establish **all** the critical high-bandwidth communication "tools" **that** are **necessary** creates a very difficult road **to success.

Now do you agree? I thought you might.

The loss of just a few words makes a tremendous difference in the message. We're all aware of the communication challenges that two people can face, even when they're together in the same room. Now, consider what happens when instead of two people you have 20, living in different parts of the world, speaking several different languages, coming from different backgrounds with totally distinct ways of seeing the world: You multiply the problem by several new dimensions that increase the likelihood of omission, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation.

Dictionary.com lists 96 (!) definitions for the word "up". At left is a partial list. Explain THAT to a non-native English speaker.

So it is with a globally diverse team. Every day can bring new challenges borne of distance, culture, language, life experience, and time, making successful communication that much more difficult. The challenges facing a project manager who holds responsibility for a global project can be daunting. Just ensuring that members are clearly and consistently communicating with one another can easily take up the bulk of his or her time! In fact, perhaps it should.

> "Consider what happens when… you have 20 [people], living in different parts of the world, speaking several different languages, coming from different backgrounds with totally distinct ways of seeing the world."

Language Barriers

One of the most intelligent, accomplished, savvy, and dedicated members of the casual game development community used to speak at length about "auditory perception." I was puzzled by his apparent fascination with ears! I consistently frustrated him with my confused and slightly stupid nodding to his undoubtedly inspired insight. One day, I realized that when he said "auditory," what he meant was "audience." This was my first introduction to the practical impact of a "language barrier."

The truth is that most of us have never been so personally affected by a language barrier that we've had to form a deep understanding of the subtle effects of it. Vocabulary plays a part—as do grammar, word choice, sentence structure, pronunciation, and other mechanics—but those are so obvious they rarely cause real issues. Consider this example: A colleague of mine is a very accomplished non-native English speaker. His vocabulary is probably wider than my own, as is his grasp of English grammar. I hooked him up with a co-worker (a writer, in this case) so that the two of them could quickly hash out the impact of story progression changes on engineering tasks. Ten days and three phone calls later, the issue still hadn't been successfully addressed. For the fourth call, I joined in and was finally able to deduce the problem. The writer's unfamiliar accent, which as a native-speaker I didn't even hear, and his lightning-fast delivery was overwhelming my project manager's ability to clearly comprehend the conversation! It's pretty obvious how pacing of verbal delivery might contribute to a language barrier, even for a very accomplished English speaker. However, my experience with this colleague was that he understood English well enough that this was not typically a problem. The "aha" moment for me came when I discovered that language barrier challenges can be cumulative—that even though they might pose no significant problem individually, such moments of poor communications can stack up and inhibit understanding, even for a very accomplished non-native speaker.

Another, perhaps more insidious, example involves written comprehension: A map object in a recent game was entitled the "Living House" in the game design document. When I asked the development lead for a "better representation of a Living House," I became increasingly frustrated

Language Barriers, Culture Gaps, and Time Warps

Challenges Managing Globally Diverse Virtual Teams

Just getting from here to there can be an iffy proposition in some places. If this were your only option for a ride, you might be better off walking.

when my requests were (apparently) ignored. At last the issue came to a head, and it was then that I discovered that "Living House" was being interpreted by the art team as "a house someone lives in" as opposed to "a house that is actually alive." Surprise! A particular phrase, even if not idiomatic, might be understood in parts, but in combination it can create a meaning that only a native-speaker is likely to grasp.

Culture Gaps

There's this guy—we'll call him David—who grew up in the United States. As a small boy, his parents always had a car. Everyone he knows has a car and has had access to one since the age of eighteen. With a few exceptions here and there car ownership is a staple of American life. As a result, David's sense of distance is skewed. Twenty miles is nothing! Just hop in the car and go! Even when he visits a city in the U.S. in which he has no car, he can usually get where he needs to go by way of reliable public transportation. Twenty miles? It's no big deal.

Then there's this other guy—we'll call him Oleg. He lives in a place where traveling twenty miles is a pretty big deal, especially late in the evening when the buses or trains don't run often. Car ownership is uncommon and public transportation unreliable—and as a result, such a trip can be difficult, time-consuming, expensive—or even dangerous! Oleg doesn't "just hop in the car" ever.

Now, think what might happen if David and Oleg are working together on a project. When David asks Oleg to travel twenty miles to the office, or to home, or to get dinner, he's thinking "no big deal" and doesn't provide any options or opportunity for discussion. But when Oleg hears the request, he's thinking "How in the world am I supposed to do that?" Since there is no opportunity for discussion, Oleg manages the best he can, but the project slows down and the staff gets more and more grumpy due to David's apparent unreasonableness. Oleg and his team don't know that David isn't being inconsiderate on purpose. In the end the problem can be solved with a few extra dollars in the budget for late night cab fare, but it might not get discussed until it has become a crisis.

As some of you might have picked up, this example has a basis in a real-life experience, not a theoretical one. It illustrates the following point: We all tend to view problems, tasks, or situations through the almost imperceptible lenses our particular cultures impose. Life experiences and cultural mores tint our assumptions about the way things work. Unless you are extraordinarily well-traveled with a very well developed sense of both macro- and micro-differences in cultural perceptions, you may be subject to culture-based preconceptions without even realizing it.

Time Warps

Personal electronics are largely responsible for making virtual global teams a reality. But while those electronics have done a lot to eliminate the challenges related to distance, they can do little to ameliorate the difficulties of working across multiple time zones. Simply stated, a project takes much, much longer if every question takes 12 hours to answer. The effects of a major time difference between project team locations can be obvious (you are sleeping while your lead programmer is awake), and at the beginning of a project, this seems pretty straightforward to manage. However, as any good project manager knows, the value of a time-slice goes up with each day you creep closer to the deadline. Time differences have a tendency to warp a schedule, creating a growing deficit over the course of a project: You have to wait eight hours to get the answer to a five-minute question; conversations get postponed until schedules align; you're surprised by unfamiliar and unaccounted-for holidays; you lose a few hours here and there to misdirected development that cannot be redirected until the next day. Eventually you find yourself days or weeks behind schedule primarily as a result of little day-to-day gaps in your workflow.

This phenomenon exists in locally-managed projects as well of course—but there are two major differences. First, each individually contributed time deficit is much

What would your reaction be if your neighbor painted this on his garage? If you live in Bhutan, where people paint phalluses on their homes to provide protection from demons, you wouldn't think anything of it.

Know your time zones!

larger, but the time shift masks this. Losing a whole day of productivity with a local team is quite obvious because you get to experience each painful hour. However, with a team located half a world away, a full day of lost productivity just feels like a good night's sleep. Second, if you think managing "crunch" with your local team is a challenge – whoo boy! You in for a treat managing that same crunch from five-thousand miles away.

All of this really goes towards the point that, when managing team members spread out around the globe, time, distance, language, and culture differences conspire to make even the most seasoned local-team project manager sweat as timelines spin out of control or teams behave in apparently erratic and unpredictable ways. Overcoming those differences is less about developing a new set of skills and more about developing a different perspective. Once you have correctly recognized and truly internalized the validity of these issues, you can set about adapting your existing project management and communication tools to address them. It is only then that the language barriers will begin to fall, the culture gaps will start to close, and your global team will begin to work with the kind of efficiency that you have always envisioned.

Since 1999 David Nixon has dedicated himself to pioneering new ways for our "casual" games to reach new audiences. In 1999, with RealArcade, he was one of the first to see the potential of "try before you buy". In 2000 he was one of the first to attempt "2nd Party" publishing. In 2001 he was looking to Eastern Europe as a source of commercially viable PC games, inspiring game developers around the world to participate in the amazing opportunities this category offered. In 2004 he helped catapult Oberon Media onto the casual games world stage. 2005 found David evangelizing "console casual" games with his central role in the launch of Xbox Live Arcade. Now, in 2008 he works to revitalize the role of "web games" in the casual games sector, expanding the role of online communities in the future of our industry. He currently works as Executive Producer at Oberon Media. Reach him at david.nixon@casualconnect.org.

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There's No Excuse for Exclusives

A Case for Universal Release Dates

CJ Wolf

Exclusive releases have been part of the casual gaming industry for years; however, the competition to secure an exclusive on the next big game has intensified. Many game portals now offer six-figure advances and marketing commitments in exchange for a short-term exclusive, and some distributors seek to purchase the game outright. These offers can be very alluring to a developer, especially after spending nine to twelve months and hundreds of thousands of dollars working on a game. It is easy to understand why a game developer would be tempted by a $100,000+ offer for a short-term exclusive. The important question is this: Is the short-term cash really worth the long-term sacrifice of your brand?

> "The important question is this: Is the short-term cash really worth the long-term sacrifice of your brand?"

Over the years, iWin has enjoyed many exclusives, and in fact it was part of our release strategy to negotiate with all of the major portals for the most attractive exclusive offer. Many of those exclusives included home page promotion on the world's largest portals. But we have been analyzing the impact that granting an exclusive to one partner has on our brands and on our other valued distribution partners. This self-evaluation has led iWin to conclude that exclusive windowing of content ultimately has not been beneficial to the brand, our partners, or the industry as a whole.

The recent release of Last Day of Work's *Virtual Villagers 3* was non-exclusive, an approach also employed by iWin, PopCap and others.

Establishing a Brand

The number one goal of every game developer is to build a powerful brand which can be extended to multiple platforms on a global basis. In order to achieve this goal, the most important thing (besides creating a good game) is marketing. In the downloadable casual game space the best way to maximize brand exposure is to get your game placed on every single portal and have every portal support your product 110%. Casual game developers are very fortunate to receive a tremendous amount of free marketing and brand exposure by getting placement on the top portals in the world. If a game is promoted on the home page of every game portal, it will be viewed by over 100 million unique people in a given month! To put that in perspective, if you purchased 100 million advertising impressions at a $5 CPM that would cost $500,000.

In order to get this type of marketing commitment, it has been iWin's experience that it is essential to deliver the game to each distribution partner on parity. A few sites have a strict policy of not accepting a game if the game has been marketed as an exclusive on a site other than the publisher's own. And most sites are now taking the approach that they will delay the release of a "spent" game or not market it as aggressively.

I am sure this sounds like common practice to those that participate in more mature entertainment industries like the movie and core gaming markets. These industries have perfected the art of releasing new content on a global basis and neither one of these industries engage in exclusive windowing of content.

When Disney launches a blockbuster movie like *Chronicles of Narnia,* they don't give Loew's or United Artists an exclusive. The industry standard practice for releasing a movie is to set a release date which becomes the "opening night" for all movie theatre chains. Leading up to opening night, the studio focuses all of its marketing efforts around this date, which in turn creates buzz, excitement, and demand. This energy and anticipation spawns an enormous amount of free publicity the film's stars appear on talk shows and critics write reviews for newspapers or magazines. The first few weeks following a movie's release are absolutely critical inasmuch as 70% to 80% of total sales are generated in that time period. The same can be said for the casual download market: It is essential to generate buzz and momentum for a game upon launch—otherwise the game gets lost among the plethora of other game launches.

iWin has matured as a company and so has our release strategy. Recently we have determined to model ourselves after the core gaming and movie industries. As such, we no longer award exclusives for download games as we believe the best approach is to inform all of our partners about a new release at the same time. We establish a release date at least 30 days after delivering the final game-build since many partners need a longer lead time due to QA, wrapping, and scheduling issues. This approach ensures that all of our partners have ample time to prepare the game and create marketing material for a simultaneous launch across all portals. The goal is to have all of our partners firing

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emails at 12:01 a.m. the day of the release and putting all of their marketing muscle behind our game. By no means is iWin the first to employ this approach in the casual space—other leading casual publishers like PopCap and PlayFirst employ this release strategy as well. Another top game publisher, Last Day of Work, recently adopted this approach with the release of *Virtual Villagers 3*. Much like the core space and the movie industry, this is the best way to maximize your brand's exposure and create a long-term sustainable franchise.

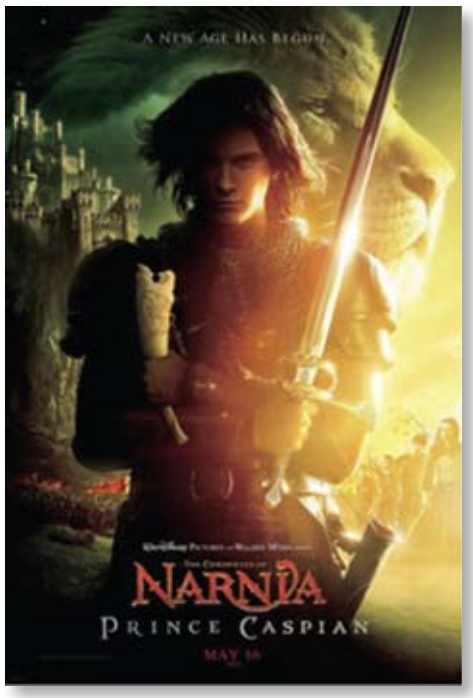
Treating Partners Like Partners

iWin has over 20 first party titles developed by our studio and 95 second party titles published or aggregated by iWin. Due to this large and diverse portfolio of games, we have a unique perspective on market share. Based on our data, the largest distributor represents only 18% of total download sales for iWin's games. What is more interesting is that the top three distributors account for only 44% of gross sales. This parity is a drastic contrast to the traditional retail market where the largest distributor represents between 40% and 50% of game sales and the top three account for approximately 80%. We've concluded that it doesn't make economic or business sense to give preferential treatment to a portal that might represent only 10% to 16% of the market at the risk of alienating our other key partners that make up the additional 80+%.

Building the Industry

In order for the casual game market to continue to extend its audience beyond middle-aged females, the industry needs to establish mega brands that transcend the medium and become mainstream, household names. The casual market needs to create powerful franchises like

> When Disney launches a blockbuster movie like *Chronicles of Narnia*, they don't give Loew's or United Artists an exclusive.



the core gaming industry's *John Madden, The Sims, Guitar Hero* and *Mario*. In order to create such casual brands, three things need to happen:

1. Establish a powerful online brand.
2. Export the game to other platforms on a global basis.
3. Expand the marketing and promotion beyond the online game channels.

A game has no chance of becoming a household brand name unless it first becomes a prominent online brand, and that is only achievable if it gets universal distribution and maximum marketing support on all of the portals. Then if the game becomes a well-recognized brand online, it has a good opportunity to be published on other platforms (handheld, mobile, console, and set-top boxes). It is only through such cross-platform extension that the brand can reach a different audience and gain exposure to more potential users. Of course, the big pay-off comes when the publishers within these new markets commit their marketing capital and expertise to building up the brand as well.

Needless to say, granting a portal an exclusive window jeopardizes wider distribution and marketing commitments. As such, long-term sales will suffer as will the potential for taking the game to other platforms. If we as an industry adopted the more mature release practices exemplified by the core gaming and movie industries, the casual gaming market would have a much better chance of creating household brands. On the other hand, if we continue to focus on short-term gains and pit distribution partners against one another, then we as an industry will remain a niche business.

CJ Wolf is the founder and CEO of iWin, Inc. Before starting iWin, Mr. Wolf founded another casual game site called BigPrizes.com in 1999. BigPrizes was a games reward site that was sold to Jackpot.com (now part of Connexus) in 2001. In addition to casual game sites, Mr. Wolf purchased and managed VirtualStockExchange.com from 2001 to 2003 when it was sold to MarketWatch. Prior to his Internet experience, Mr. Wolf was a stock trader at Pershing and Jones & Associates and a public accountant with Coopers & Lybrand. Mr. Wolf is a CPA and holds a BS in Accounting from Georgetown University. He can be reached at cj.wolf@casualconnect.org.

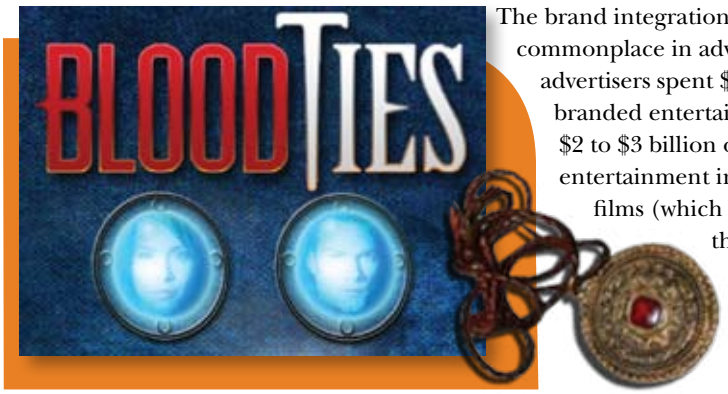
The New Face of Advergaming

The *Blood Ties* Success Story

Lloyd Melnick

Although *Blood Ties* sold about 100,000 units in the first few months after its launch, it is more than just another hit hidden object game. In fact, it represents the future convergence of advertising and gaming. With the hype regarding in-game advertising and around-game advertising reaching a crescendo, and with press releases coming out every week, observers (and investors) clearly think that advertising is a crucial revenue driver in the casual games market. Yet, when reviewed carefully, the advertising revenue from downloadable casual games is negligible compared with the traditional sales revenue. Although ad-supported games show much higher revenue than their download equivalents, those games are either second (or third) tier titles or old games. (Ask yourself: When was the last time the newest installment of *Mystery Case Files* or *XYZ Dash* launched with both an ad-supported version and a try-before-you-buy version?) The truth is that advertising revenue has primarily remained a key driver of press releases and not financial statements. That is, until *Blood Ties* hit the scene.

Blood Ties, which is based on a show of the same name that aired on Lifetime TV, is a co-production between Merscom and Lifetime Networks. Developed as a strong hidden-object title, *Blood Ties* is a game that would stand on its own merit with or without the tie-in to the television series. Merscom and Lifetime's production teams benchmarked against the best hidden object games, holding repeated focus groups and speaking repeatedly with the distribution channel to ensure that the game lived up to expectations. Unlike licensed properties in the core gaming space, the IP was not used as a replacement for strong game-play; rather the underlying *Blood Ties* IP was used to provide coherence to the back-story, enhance the artwork, and give players a reference point.



A New Approach to Advergaming

Is *Blood Ties* an advergame? Not if your definition of advergame is popping bubbles that say Coke. But that merely suggests that the conventional notion of advergaming is flawed. In fact, *Blood Ties* represents the new face of advertising. On the surface, it is a high-quality hidden object game that appeals to a large number of casual gamers (as shown by its 1.5 million plus downloads and nearly 100,000 sales). At the same time, *Blood Ties* has also created tremendous interest in the underlying television property. Although the show was cancelled a few months before the launch of the game, the game provided a huge boost to the property. After the game's release, message boards on Lifetime and multiple entertainment sites buzzed with discussions about the show and a Facebook community took off. The hype created by the *Blood Ties* game even suggests the show might get another shot, showing the value of a casual game in promoting a media property. Given the huge boost the game provided to the show, Merscom believes *Blood Ties* demonstrates the promotional effect a game can have on a brand.

Brand Integration

The brand integration model is now commonplace in advertising. In 2007, advertisers spent $23 billion on branded entertainment, including $2 to $3 billion on branded entertainment in video games and films (which dwarfs the size of the entire try-before-you-buy part of the casual game market). According to eMarketer, advertising spending within advergaming and in-game advertising is expected to rise 25% in 2008.

> "According to eMarketer, advertising spending within advergaming and in-game advertising is expected to rise 25% in 2008."

Customers did not mind—in fact, they loved—that *Blood Ties* was integrated with a television show many of them enjoyed; one of the most common complaints about *Blood Ties* was that it did not have enough elements from the show. The game hit upon one of the emerging trends in advertising: to integrate brands into content (particularly television shows and movies) without relying on overt advertising.

Brand integration is an overlooked part of the advertising equation for casual games, with *Blood Ties* one of the few (if not the only) successes in this area. The fear many game publishers and developers have—that integrating a brand or brands will hurt the game—is also not borne out by the data. *Blood Ties* has converted at nearly twice the rate of any of Merscom's previous titles, despite the fact that it also promotes a property. According to Hamet Webb, founder of NextMedium, the highest rated shows on television have the most product placement—there is no correlation between product advertising and quality of the show. Placing a brand inside does not erode the show. Mr. Webb points out, however, that you need to make sure the brand matches the content. What that suggests for casual games is that the right brand can actually enhance the game.

The New Face of Advergaming

The *Blood Ties* Success Story

Guidelines for Making a Successful Advergame

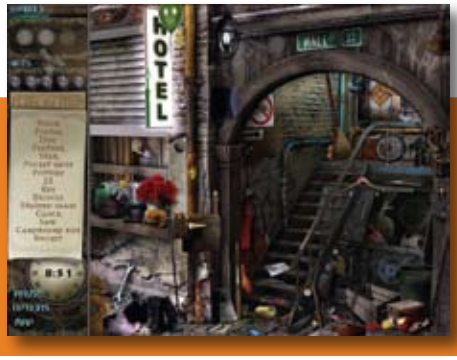
The issue most developers now face is how best to replicate *Blood Ties'* success. We have identified several guidelines to help increase the likelihood of creating a game that is both a commercial and promotional success:

1. *Make sure the brand appeals to the core demographic for casual games—women age 30 and over.* You may obtain the rights to an extremely popular television series, but if the series does not resonate with casual gamers it will either have no effect or a negative effect on the success of the game. Moreover, there will be little promotional value if the gamers are fundamentally not interested in the property.
2. *The game has got to be great.* Unlike many other consumer goods (and core games, for that matter), a strong property cannot mask a bad game. Most people play casual games on a try-before-you-buy basis. If the game is not fun, they will not buy it. If people are not buying it, it falls out of the top-ten charts and is quickly forgotten. The property can add depth to the game and improve the enjoyment, but the game itself needs to be great to succeed in the casual space.
3. *The game style must be consistent with the property.* There are several core game-play dynamics and some fit better with certain properties than others. *Blood Ties* would not have succeeded as a match-three game but was a perfect fit for a hidden object game. Other properties lend themselves better to click management, adventure, puzzle, etc. If the property is forced into the game, the feel of the game will be negatively affected and players will not immerse themselves into the title.
4. *Be imaginative but test frequently.* Repeatedly test the game, both with typical casual gamers and with fans of the brand or property. This testing can then help with the creative. The opportunity to become innovative and very creative with the advertisers can be the most exciting part of integrating a brand into a casual game. Rather than just inserting a video before or after your game, or posting in it some static banners, you have the chance to bring the story and the property together. Testing will help you use the best elements of the property—including the world around it—to add new levels of depth to your game that especially resonate with fans. In a recent Webinar, David Berkowitz of marketersstudio.com, an expert of the new age of marketing, identified gaming as a particularly exciting opportunity for marketers because there are so many different ways to integrate brands. Use your testing to help inspire new integration ideas.
5. *Leverage the underlying property in the marketing campaign.* If the show or movie has a strong following, appeal to those fans, even the ones who are not casual gamers. Visit forums, network through MySpace and Facebook, and advertise where the fans are. Do promotions with the property-holder to boost awareness of the game with fans of the property. These often provide free or inexpensive ways to differentiate your game from other new titles and quickly rise to the top of the charts—and stay there.

The Model for the Future

Since releasing *Blood Ties*, multiple media companies have come to realize the marketing value as well as revenue opportunities available in casual gaming. As a consequence, Merscom is already working on separate projects related to a major theatrical release and to an upcoming TV event. Other projects are also in the works with Lifetime, a TV production company, and a publishing company. In all these cases, Merscom's partners see not only the opportunity to generate a strong ROI but the ability to build a brand around their IP. That value is crucial to virtually any advertiser and represents the true advertising opportunity for casual games. It is the new face of advergaming.

Lloyd Melnick (lloyd.melnick@casualconnect.org), Chief Customer Officer and Co-Founder of Merscom, has been involved with publishing and licensing computer and video games for more than 14 years. At Merscom, Melnick has marketed, produced, and published more than 150 games for both the casual and core gamer market. He has also arranged strategic relationships with Massive Inc., Adscape, Eyeblaster, Exent, Double Fusion, IGA Worldwide, DISCover, and Scandinavian Games. Melnick has a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Political Economy from John Hopkins University and a Masters in Business Administration from Duke University's Fuqua School of Business. He also earned a Master of Arts in European Integration from the University of Limerick in Ireland.



Start Rethinking Your Business Plan

A Commentary

Ken Kutaragi saw the future of gaming in the PS3. He figured that if a game console could provide interactive content, film content, and the Internet—and jump between them all in a seamless universe—it would open up the entertainment possibilities and start a creative renaissance. And better yet: Developers, producers, and designers would finally feel unrestricted and embrace such a platform! Right? Wrong.

After trying to convince his own employer and many renowned film producers and visionaries of the PS3's potential, Kutaragi was squeezed out, and no such hybrid games emerged. But why? Perhaps it was because his idea of what was possible differed so greatly from what actually was. Consider, if you will, how rarely anyone at a commercial studio challenges the prevailing notion of what a production line is, or what entertainment looks like, or how entertainment is created. To deviate from common practice is just too risky and unconventional. Evangelizing takes time and requires visionaries, and creating new types of entertainment means money and risk without guarantees of consumer acceptance. It's as if the studios have embraced that line from the movie *Strictly Ballroom:* "Where do you think we'd be if everyone went around making up their own steps?"

Where we'd be, as it turns out, is exactly where we're headed. So long as capitalism rewards entrepreneurs for innovative thinking, there will be people hoping to turn things on their heads for fun and profit—to challenge norms and try things that large companies can never consider. This sort of development, unconstrained by conventional restrictions related to file size, distribution, and business models, leads to a very interesting glimpse of a very exciting future.

As a case in point, take a look a www.worldgolftour.com. It's a casual game that is infinitely scalable, and—get this—there is no download. You simply go online, register, click, and play. Unlike a game which must be downloaded, *World Golf Tour (WGT)* is a destination on its own with a strong community of players. It has a very strong in-game advertising model combined with micro-transactions and virtual item sales. Come to think of it, its revenue model is very much like *ESPN Fantasy Football.*

Speaking on the benefits of publishing the game on the web, YuChiang Cheng, the CEO of *WGT* says, "We have the ability to constantly adapt to user feedback and iterate on improving the product. We can take the game of golf and create many sub-games within the genre to satisfy many different types of players."

When asked how he sees *WGT* changing the game landscape in the broadest sense, he adds, "Our model will continue to help shift the attention of game companies away [from] the hardcore gamer and focus more on the neglected mass-market demographic. Accessible, high-quality, low barrier-to-entry games are the future. The *WGT* difference is that we bring console quality to the PC for free—with no download."

Like *WGT*, the casual games of the future will most likely have their own domain names, endless levels, communities and beyond. In addition, each game will be backed by a development team that works to respond to its players and keep them coming back, adding sticky stuff daily or weekly like other websites and communities do. Club Pogo creates its stickiness by aggregating games and creating a virtual world around those games; but that is only one model. *WGT* may prove that a *single game* can support a community even without a virtual world or avatars or downloads (or, for that matter, game distributors).

Think about that long enough and words fail. It's not at all clear what this *WGT* thing is, to be honest. Is it a game, or a site, or a world, or a community? Or is it some combination of these? Well, whatever it is—and whatever we end up calling it—what makes it especially cool is that it's a big scalable idea. Big enough, in fact, that I would urge you—today—to log on, take a few practice shots, and start to rethink your business plan.

Kevin Richardson

"*WGT* may prove that a *single game* can support a community even without a virtual world or avatars or downloads (or, for that matter, game distributors)."

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Get in the Game

Using Advertising to Reach and Keep the Diverse Audience of Gamers

Bryan Cashman & Matt Garland

Advertisers are always on the quest for the best new venue to promote products and services to consumers. And what has more potential for successful outreach than videogames? With videogames keeping more—and more diverse—consumers captive, advertisers who don't enter this arena now risk missing out on viral results and losing contact with their consumers' communities.

The benefits of this maturing advertising platform are eye-opening:

- The content is interactive at a time when consumers are losing interest in static entertainment.
- The demographics are often difficult to capture elsewhere.
- The platform has unique capabilities to create all-important mindshare by pushing an advertising message virally into a community.

Unlike traditional advertising platforms, gaming enables advertisers to form an interactive dialogue with consumers. With the right approach, this platform can enable advertisers to establish an interactive relationship with consumers and their peers, even after an advertisement ends. By tapping into a gamer's community, marketers can create mindshare to an exponential degree.

But to reap the benefits, advertisers must be smart and they must be creative. They will need to know which advertising option to execute, how to avoid the risks of backlash and cost, and how best to utilize the creative and interactive sides of videogames to enjoy the free benefits found in the blogging and gaming community.

Already, the data shows a paradigm shift with 90% of polled advertising executives responding that they will place part of their advertising budgets in new media such as video games and viral communities.[1] Those companies slow to engage the in-game audience are at risk of losing out on building new long-term relationships with their target audience.

Advertisers hoping to create interactive experiences with gamers may adjust their value chains to work more directly with development studios who manage the interactive engagement of the gamer. Indeed, developing strong relationships with development studios will be critical as they will control the creation of the most imaginative and valuable inventory—interactive placement.

Interaction

With consumers increasingly finding passive information "too boring[2]," advertisers must quickly embrace more interactive media. As shown in *Figure 1,* the consumer's dissatisfaction with passive entertainment only increases with each successive generation. Consumers crave an interactive experience. This attitude is consistent with their increasing comfort level with and demand for more sophisticated technologies. A Deloitte research survey found that those born after 1980 prefer to learn in groups, using multimedia, and while being entertained and excited.[3] To target these emerging demographic groups, advertisers need to look past static entertainment and approach consumers through interactive means.

A Diverse Audience

What was once considered strictly a hobby of teenage boys has evolved into an entertainment platform for a diverse audience. So it follows that videogames are now an important platform to advertise a remarkable array of products and services beyond those attractive just to young males.

> "Advertisers who don't enter this arena now risk missing out on viral results and losing contact with their consumers' communities."

In fact, contrary to most assumptions, in some videogame communities the teenage male actually is the minority. For example, at one popular casual game portal, females play 9.1 hours a week, while males play only 6.1 hours.[5] And as a core activity for males with increasingly broadening demographics, video gaming is a medium advertisers cannot afford to overlook.

As shown in *Figure 2,* over 50% of all age groups are playing games. Let us review some statistics about today's gaming audience:

- *All Age Groups Play:* Users of entertainment software come from all age groups; the majority of consumers under 55 have played a videogame in the past two weeks.[7]
- *Most Popular Activity for Youth:* A recent survey shows that 93% of young children are already playing electronic games,[8] a total which vastly outpaces traditional

Figure 1. Entertainment preferences

Age group	%
13–19	56
20–34	47
35–54	28
55–70	29

Dissatisfaction with passive entertainment [5]

Figure 2. Video game consumption by age

Age group	%
13–19	54
20–34	62
35–54	57
55–70	57

Played a video game in the past two weeks [7]

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media. The second most popular activity is listening to music.

- *A Preferred Entertainment for Older Women:* Thirty-seven percent of women over 40 would rather play a casual videogame on the computer than watch television.[9] Continuing to exclusively target women through traditional broadcasting and print platforms instead of also including dynamic entertainment will mean the loss of a potentially lucrative market.
- *Video Games Are a Family Activity:* Forty-four percent of adult gamers have a child who also plays games, and 71% of those gaming parents say they play with their kids.[10]

Soon target audiences will be of an age at which they will not know of a time without videogames.

How did gaming grow? The diversification of the gaming audience is driven by two key trends in the game industry: a move towards easier "pick up and play" casual games and technology, like the Nintendo Wii and mobile phones, which offers hardware for a wider audience.

How to Sell and Market in Games: a Primer

Currently existing ad-gaming networks now allow advertisers to sell to any range of demographics. These networks collect ad space from a library of PC (and increasingly mobile, web, and console) games, and subsequently fill that space with targeted ad creative. The platform's credibility has grown further as a result of recent news reports, including eMarketer's projection of two billion dollars in revenue by 2011 and Google's acquisition of Adscape.

> A preferred entertainment for older women: Thirty-seven percent of women over 40 would rather play a casual videogame on the computer than watch television.

Today there are game-exclusive networks that allow ad buyers to specify a target audience and have their message pushed through a library of games, all while tracking how long the consumer is engaged by the ad and even at what angle the ad appears on the user's screen. Targeting capabilities are also developing, such as:

- Geo-targeting (which uses IP address and other information)
- IP and domain exclusion lists
- User account profiles for online communities or games

The ads themselves often exist as static images, although they are increasingly available as 3D prop formats or as video.

Advertisements can appear in videogames in both online and offline formats. Offline advertisements have the added benefit of reaching game consoles that are not connected to the Internet, while online advertisements can better serve advertisers by offering dynamic ad placement with enhanced targeting capabilities. Each option for game advertising has an increasing level of interaction with the consumer (see *Figure 3*).

Level 1: Around-Game Environment Ads[11]

As the simplest form of ad-gaming, around-game environment ads are popular among web-based games and largely operate like standard web ads that support web articles. These advertisements exist outside of the actual game space, often appearing to users as banner ads that surround the game's content on its web site. Since these are simple ads that are placed on a browser-based game's website, the level of interactivity and mindshare generated by these are minimal; nevertheless they are easy to execute and can be highly targeted by linking to and leveraging a user's web history. These ads may also occur offline, where older game titles are sometimes packaged with other products whose ads are wrapped around the game experience.

Level 2: In-game Environment Ads[12]

The next level in ad-gaming is in-game environment ads. This method allows advertisers to purchase access to a network

Figure 3. **Advertising options in entertainment software and their advantages and disadvantages**

Level	Advantages	Disadvantages
Level 1 Around-game environment ads	Online web games follow model similar to web. Advanced targeting possible via browsing history.	Less integration with content.
Level 2 In-game environment ads	Placement can occur on PC and console titles. Minimum effort targeting by geography and individual game demographics.	Inventory supply varies by genre and audience.
Level 3 In-game immersive ads	Most effective in taking advantage of interactive entertainment's medium. Most likely to create vital benefits.	These one-off arrangements take extra time and resources.

of games and have their static ads pasted throughout virtual game worlds. These advertisements often occur as billboards or signs within the game. While the gamer does not interact directly with these ads, they are clearly visible as the gamer navigates through an in-game world. The key here is that the ads must be relevant to the specific videogame world in which they appear.

Level 3: In-Game Immersive Ads[13]

The most sophisticated interaction is found in the third level of ad-gaming: in-game immersive ads. Under this arrangement, a brand or message is pushed to gamers with the help of a game's developer, so that an advertiser's message becomes a part of the game itself. These interactive placements generally merge the brand or message with that of the actual game experience—making the player's contact with the messages active rather than passive. For example, a popular automobile might be featured on a virtual racetrack, or a manufacturer's phone might be used as a virtual spy tool, or a popular real-world restaurant might be a venue in a dynamic videogame world.

This form of advertising allows the advertising message to become an actual part of the gaming experience and, as a part of the action, it has the ability to generate significant viral communication among gamers. Currently, in-game immersive ads are utilized heavily in advergames, which is a form of video game designed solely for a specific brand or advertising. In addition, immersive ads have unique capabilities to merge a game with reality by offering real-world coupons or merchandise opportunities outside of a videogame.

Endgame

The right approach to advertising in games can bring remarkable results. Studies show that 60% of players on a popular ad network can recall an ad after three months, with 30% to 40% still recalling the ad after six months.[14] These numbers are far ahead of TV or Internet advertising, and dramatically highlight the advantages of interactive platforms.

In addition, purchase intent increases greatly through interactive advertising. A study by Massive Incorporated and Nielsen Entertainment found that average purchase consideration increased by 41% for those who played a game with ads compared to the same game without ads. Other key metrics show an increase in average brand rating by 37%, and an increase in average brand familiarity by 64%.[15]

Figure 4. **In-game advertising can touch the consumer both during and after game-play.**

In the Game (During Game-play)	After the Game (Game Community)
Interactive game-play content	Blogs
Visual component or environment	Game press
Single console multiplayer component	Social discussions
Online multiplayer component	User-created video
Music	Tips & tricks sharing

The Viral Benefits of Interactive Placement

Interaction is an inherent component of community, and with the assistance of game developers, advertisers can take advantage of the interactive characteristics of videogames, resulting in ads that spread virally through gamer communities. Just as media consumption moves towards interaction, so must the advertisement formats themselves. While a static advertisement in a videogame can capture a gamer's mindshare during gameplay, more interactive advertisements have the potential to tap the mindshare of the gaming community even after a game is turned off.

As *Figure 4* highlights, advertisers must understand where they want their advertising message to touch the consumer. Static advertisements in game worlds appear prominently on the screen and can receive great in-game exposure (for example, a billboard on a virtual basketball court), but interactive product placement can create new contact points with the game community long after a game system is shut off. An interactive advertisement that becomes a critical component of the gaming experience will be discussed in blogs, the game press, and even social discussions between friends in school yards and chat rooms. With such free viral benefits, advertisers wishing to make long-term relationships with their users should create interactive ad content that will break into their consumer's community.

Figure 5 shows how different advertising techniques can reach different downstream contact points with the consumer. Depending on the execution of the advertisement, an advertiser has the ability to be covered in the game press, blog community, or the gamer's mindshare through direct gameplay with the advertiser's message. Placing an advertiser's product as a prop in a game will increase mindshare through direct contact with the gamer during gameplay, but designing a high quality game around an advertiser's message can also penetrate the blog community, game press, and social discussions. Such advertising can have direct transactional benefits as well when it entices gamers to go to a store and make a purchase in order to play the title.

To capture a gamer's mindshare, advertisers need to be especially creative in their executions. While the skills of traditional ad creative houses will still be necessary, agencies will have to work with game developers to provide truly interactive experiences. While a virtual racetrack billboard created by a traditional ad company will receive a high impression count from gamers, the viral results would be far greater if gamers could access a special track by crashing into an advertiser's ad at a specific angle. This type of exciting gameplay feature also tends to excite the game community into discussion.

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Figure 5. **The impact of in-game advertising is directly related to the level of interaction of the ad placement.**

	Examples of In-Game Advertising Options				
Advertising Impact	Including game "footage" in your product's commercial	Using product as in-game prop	Packaging simple free branded game wit product	Featuring an artist's song in a music game	Packaging high-quality branded game packed with advertiser's product
Game-play visuals (visible in game only)		●	●	●	●
Game-play component (interactive element of game)		●	●	●	●
Game-play component in multi-player game		●	●	●	●
Game-play component in online multi-player game		●	●	●	●
Game press discussion				●	●
Blog community discussion	●			●	●
Social (peer-to-peer) discussion	●			●	●
Direct sale of advertised product			●		●

Inside Game ↑ / Outside Game ↓

Level of interaction →

Videogame players love secrets, so why not use that to push a product message? By linking an innovative secret in a videogame with a brand, the brand will flourish in the enthusiast press, blogs, forums, and even real-world discussions between gaming friends. In such cases, an ad's performance can be judged not merely by impression counts but by tracking actual discussion found on the web as ewll. Success is not impressions per placement; success is mindshare per campaign.

A Summer 2007 Deloitte analysis performed on 20 entertainment software advertising campaigns shows that the more interactive the advertisement, the more attention the advertisement receives in the online community. The lesson learned is advertisers should not duplicate static campaigns on interactive platforms; instead, they should embrace interaction in the ad itself.

By tracking a campaign's popularity on YouTube, Google, and Technorati, we discovered that downstream coverage was strongest for advertisements that had in-game interactive placement. Be it an advergame (a game created to solely push a marketing message) or interactive product placement (such as making your product a key item in a game), these advertising methods generated far more discussion online than regular static environment placement (such as including an advertised movie poster inside a virtual world).

The best performing game advertisements in the web community include a popular toy company's product placement in a virtual world, the release of Xbox games at a restaurant chain, and the placement of cars in an online world. Each of these interactive advertisements resulted in significant community activity on YouTube, websites, and blogs. The more an advertisement merges with the game-play, the more free publicity it receives downstream in the gaming community.

The Game Developer's Critical New Role

With in-game immersive ads and advergaming generating the most viral results, advertisers and game developers must optimize their value chain so that advertisers have close contact with development studios. As the platform evolves, game development studios will play a critical role in the success of interactive ad placement. If interactive placement is going to be successful, it cannot be forced. The product placement has to match the game's time, place, and audience, of which game developers have the greatest grasp.

Successful placement is more than an advertised soda can on a beach billboard; in the gaming world, it is developing a surprising advertising message that is so creative and innovative that gamers will talk about it long after they finish playing a game. To that end, good execution requires the creative talents of game development studios. Studios hoping to take advantage of this emerging advertising product should create a position on each project team to help develop and communicate upcoming inventory of a title.

Because innovative and interactive inventory supply is by its nature limited (since it only succeeds in the correct context of its placement), advertisers should maintain close relationships with

Figure 6. **Top three ad gaming performers in gaming community (by Website)**
Note the absence of static advertisement placement.

YouTube video count	Interactive placement Advergame Interactive placement	Song performance in game Videogame designed around restaurant brand Automobiles featured in sports game
YouTube top impressions	Interactive placement Advergame Advergame	Song performance in game Interactive news game for television network Videogame designed around restaurant brand
Google entries	Interactive placement Interactive placement Interactive placement	Toy company's placement in virtual world Car company's placement in virtual world Videogame designed around restaurant brand
Technorati (Blog) hits	Interactive placement Advergame Interactive placement	Videogame designed around restaurant brand Car company's placement in virtual world Clothing company in virtual world

the development studios' creative leads. If they do not, they may lose their consumers' mindshare. Even those who make contact with development studios late in the game can still stay involved by building close ties with a game publisher's ad department or through niche ad-service providers.

Taking Ad Gaming to Another Level

By using videogames to reach one's community, advertisers are moving beyond traditional static messages and becoming a critical layer in the entertainment experience. If you consider that videogames consist of interactive gameplay, graphical images, and multi-player teamwork, advertisers have a multi-pronged opportunity to reach these consumers. As our research shows, the more contact advertising has with these dynamic attributes, the more free coverage the brands will receive downstream. Why just touch the consumer during an ad-view when the opportunity exists to meet the consumer through voluntary blog posts, social discussion, and user-generated content from the gamer community?

By searching the web for keywords of various in-game advertising campaigns, it was discovered that interactive placement advertisements generate the most traffic and discussions on the web. As shown in *Figure 6,* the top three most popular in-game advertisements on YouTube, Google, and Technorati are frequently interactive placement ads. Advergames are also popular in discussion on the web, but static advertisement placements are not shown anywhere on the list. Instead, in-game advertisements such as a car company's placement in a virtual world, a videogame designed around a restaurant brand, and songs performed in game frequent the list.

That suggest that interaction can be taken to many levels. Videogame players can be rewarded in-game with codes for real-world coupons or discounts. Alternatively, real-world soda bottles can include unique codes for different upgrades in a videogame, which can later be traded with users in the real world for other upgrades. By increasing a videogame's scope into reality, the gaming community can be driven to the web and to brick-and-mortar stores to further compete in their games. Other examples include issuing codes for the purchase of real-world videogame merchandise online and introducing new clothing or sneaker lines in games. If a gamer completes a racing videogame with a manufacturer's car, the manufacturer might use in-game advertising to bring the gamer into a dealership for a test-drive in exchange for free additional tracks and cars for the videogame.

Second Life and other virtual worlds pose unique opportunities to advertisers. Since virtual worlds often mimic reality, they provide unique opportunities to engage the gamer with interactive placements that mirror the real world. *Figure 6* shows that interactive placement in virtual worlds are often most discussed on the web, confirming the viral benefits of virtual world advertisements. Further, Deloitte research shows that among those surveyed ages 13–34, almost a quarter state that product placement in virtual worlds and online videogames influences them more than any other online advertising.[16] What's more, the influence of virtual worlds may continue to grow as media companies invest in worlds designed for younger audiences. Despite only focusing on children, the online world *Club Penguin* already attracts seven times the traffic of the global, all-ages, *Second Life*.[17]

The Benefits to Traditional Media

The advantages of this craving for interactivity are not limited strictly to advertisers or game publishers. Traditional media can also benefit by offering free branded online games to create their own gaming communities and subsequent advertising and viral marketing opportunities. Two leading magazines recently signed a multi-year agreement to release free online games on their websites, with goals of driving readers of the print publications online and creating a new community around the publication. At a time when the print media is so concerned about losing readership, building novel interactive opportunities online is a strategic play that could mitigate that concern.

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The ability for online games to spawn communities should be harnessed by traditional companies hoping to increase brand loyalty and interest. Using games to build online communities can keep fans excited about television shows between new episodes, can drive recurring purchases for syndicated content such as comics, and can help build a fan base for movies prior to release.

Reality Check: The Challenges of Getting in the Game

Of course, each advertising or branding option demands different levels of effort, Investment, and risk assumption. Just as it wold approach traditional media, an advertiser must evaluate the potential of ad-gaming by first considering an ad campaign's goal. If a goal is to merely build awareness, static environment ads in games may be an inexpensive solution. Aligning a brand with a specific game or theme may suggest a need for truly interactive in-game advertisements, but such benefits may be outweighed by the costs of working with a game's development team. Similarly, to engage the user outside of the game, an advertiser will have to intelligently use interactive advertising in a game to capture the downstream community of gamers through viral means.

But, here is the challenge: While the majority of gamers do not mind advertising in games, some may view ads as intrusive, especially if poorly executed.[18] That means that each campaign also has a unique level of risk. Ads may be viewed favorably if they add to the reality of a situation (such as billboards in virtual ballparks), but if the advertisements do not fit (such as advertising cars in an ancient Chinese world), gamers will reject the advertising message and potentially create a negative viral stream.

In addition, advertisers should be selective when choosing which game genres or franchises to work with. For example, a family-friendly advertiser may warm to genres that fit their image (such as adventure games), while it may feel uncomfortable advertising in bloody death-matches. Understanding which options to use for which campaigns and products will maximize the value of in-game advertising pursuits.

And, here is another challenge: Because interactive in-game immersive ads are more expensive to create and to place

than static ads, upfront planning will be more important. And with increased early investment, proper customer segmentation and targeting will be required. Accordingly, benchmarks for success—perhaps including increased web traffic, user-generated content, or direct sales—must be addressed at the campaign's inception.

Finally, even though games are one of the fastest-growing advertising platforms in digital media, there are still many components that could benefit from further standardization. Performance metrics in particular—including impression measurement and audience metrics—are hindered by a lack of common language that allows advertisers to understand the value of in-game advertisements.

In order to add third-party objectivity to the burgeoning segment of in-game advertising media research firms like Nielsen Media Research and Interpret have recently launched services aimed at establishing standard metrics across multiple gaming platforms.[19] While these two firms have broken ground in defining performance metrics, further standardization will be required before many advertisers will feel as comfortable with the medium as they do with more traditional advertising media.

When You Get It Right, It's All About Mindshare

The potential of this exciting new advertising platform will only be discovered if advertisers are creative and measure success by mindshare, not impressions. A large group of consumers today are craving interaction at all levels: online, in media, and through communities. The videogame platform can be the link that makes an advertising campaign meet the consumer in all of these places.

When building advertising portfolios, it is important to select the platforms your consumer is most receptive to. Static advertising on passive programming is no longer enough to sell your product when young adults are eager to learn messages through interactive, exciting, and entertaining means. Advertisers who are determined to stay in the mind of their audience must communicate with game development studios to make engaging and memorable interactive ad experiences. Leading advertisers will use the videogame platform not only to capture eyeballs, but also to tap into the full community of the gamer, causing voluntary downstream promotion and viral results.

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Hitting the Jackpot

The Story of Slingo, Inc.

From the early days of the Internet, through the dot-com bust, to the advent of Web 2.0 and beyond, few casual game developers have weathered as many industry highs and lows as Slingo, Inc. and still managed to come out on top.

Since its debut in 1996, independent game developer Slingo, Inc. has grown from having a single multi-player game on America Online to being a staple of the entertainment industry. Yet the story behind *Slingo's* success is still largely unknown.

What was it that helped the *Slingo* game concept move to the next level while so many of its peers met with game-over? To truly understand the winning spirit of the Slingo brand, you first need to meet CEO Sal Falciglia, Sr., the founder and creator of *Slingo*.

Gambling on a Dream

Sal Falciglia is an unlikely figure in the casual games industry. When he began work in the early '90s on what would eventually become Slingo's flagship game, Sal was a recent retiree with a background in real estate development.

Sal has always been what many would call an "idea man," and retirement didn't slow him down one bit. Even though he had no prior experience in game development or programming, memories of his mother's love for Bingo inspired Sal to start work on a game concept of his own.

Looking at the word or question-based format of popular games such as *Wheel of Fortune* and *Jeopardy*, Sal knew he wanted to create a new and unique game show. His idea was to create a numbers-based game, which he felt would have a one-of-a-kind appeal to the mass market fans of game shows. After running through hundreds of scenarios on paper—including the backs of cocktail napkins during a flight home from vacationing in Florence, Italy—he was at a loss for where to go with the concept. Yet inspiration often comes when a person least expects it….

One night around 1:00 a.m., Sal awoke with a breakthrough. He rushed to his office to grab a pen and put his idea to paper. What if he could marry a slot machine with a bingo game? Sal played through the game in his head countless times. The idea seemed like a good one, but would it work in the real world?

Compelled to make his dream game a reality, Sal set his sights on creating a working model of the game. To get started he would need a genuine five-reel slot machine with about 20 to 22 positions per reel. Unfortunately, purchasing a new machine was out of the question since the typical price tag was over a half million dollars!

Not being the type of person who is easily deterred from a quest, Sal contacted antique dealers in the area, calling as often as two-to-three times per week over a period of several months. After checking out hundreds of models, he finally located an antique slot machine in Mexico. It fit the bill with 5 reels and 20 positions. Sal quickly had the machine sent to him in New Jersey where he set it up in his basement. After purchasing a bingo set for its cards, he got to work.

Sal began by putting his own stamp on the design of the slot machine. Gone were the pesos, cherries and plums, replaced with numbers, jokers, devils and other *Slingo* icons. These simple decals would one day become the mainstay of the *Slingo* brand.

Sal labored over the testing process for the next year, documenting everything in hundreds of ledgers and easel pads.

Eric Lamendola

> "When we first turned our attention to the online games arena, my intention was to make a game that people could relax and play. Yet we've achieved so much more than that."

He often worked through the night to the chagrin of his wife who insisted he was fruitlessly wasting his time, effort and money. "I must have pulled that lever a million times! My arm was so tired." Sal recalls. "Eventually, I had my grandsons pull the lever for me. And the game worked!"

Satisfied that he had a working game concept, Sal knew it was time to take his show on the road to begin pitching to television networks. Since moving a 400-pound slot machine throughout Manhattan is no easy task, it was prudent for him to move his concept from the physical world to the digital world. He teamed up with Bob Bielecki and John Driscoll of Shadow Interactive Inc., who developed the first digital prototype of the *Slingo* game in 1995.

At that time, America Online (AOL) was just starting up its game channel and was looking for quality licensed content. Seeing the potential for a partnership, John Driscoll arranged a demonstration at AOL headquarters in Virginia. This was truly a make-it-or-break-it opportunity for Slingo. With its immense user base, AOL was essentially "The Internet" during this period. Securing a place within the AOL.com walled garden was the kind of launching pad game developers dreamed of.

To the delight of all involved, AOL loved the game! *Slingo* had found its first home in a medium Sal had never originally intended.

Hitting the Jackpot

The Story of Slingo, Inc.

What sweetened the deal was that AOL was in the process of opening up segments of its once subscriber-only space. *Slingo* now had an opportunity to reach audiences both within and beyond AOL's borders.

Slingo Hits It Big

After the launch of its flagship game on AOL in October 1996, *Slingo* took off like a rocket. The game quickly won over players and surpassed the popular Strike-a-Match game to become one of AOL's most successful games of all time. In fact, "Slingo" was the number one keyword on AOL for three years straight and remained one of the Top 10 navigational shortcuts in the history of AOL Keywords.

Slingo, Inc. quickly capitalized on the success of its fledgling game. The *Slingo Classic* game was soon followed by its fast paced counterpart *Slingo Xpress* and its poker-style *5 Card Slingo*. In 1998, Slingo, Inc. entered the retail game market with a CD-ROM game published by Hasbro Interactive followed quickly in 1999 with a hand-held game published by Tiger Electronics.

"This was the beginning of our 'Slingo Everywhere' concept," says Sal Falciglia. "Early on, I took a number of steps to protect Slingo's intellectual property. This paved the way for Slingo's evolution through brand extensions and made it easy for us to say 'OK guys, what's next?'" Slingo entered the lottery market in 2001 with instant "scratch off" tickets by Oberthur Gaming Technologies, selling over 250-million tickets around the world. The gaming business broadened with the introduction of *Slingo* games to the casino market with slot machines by IGT.

Then, in 2000, the dot-com bubble burst. While many competitors fell by the wayside due to their reliance on a single business model, Slingo was small, agile and could easily adapt. As the model of the Internet changed, so did Slingo.

> "Slingo needed to have its own online presence to survive. . . ."

By 2002, Slingo, Inc. was well established online with AOL and had just started its own game site at Slingo.com. The casual games pioneer survived during the dot-com crash by recognizing that the nature of the business had changed. While other game providers paid to be on portals, Slingo pursued other avenues for brand expansion. Realizing that *Slingo* needed to have its own online presence to survive, the company focused on expanding its website with new games and a consistently growing community of dedicated players.

Due to its expansion into the casual game space with games for mobile, retail, and download, Slingo, Inc. continues to expand into broadcast and interactive television. Today, Slingo, Inc. has successfully grown its business from a single online game into a worldwide brand licensing giant across almost every available digital medium.

Breaking the Bank

Slingo, Inc. has consistently brought an entertaining blend of casual games and community to the Internet. To date, *Slingo* boasts almost 4-billion games played, and the number continues to grow.

"The key to our success is dedication to our loyal community," says Sal. "It's a terrific feeling to read through the letters from *Slingo* fans thanking us for providing a great experience. We always want to maintain the high quality of our advertiser and user experience to keep people coming back for more."

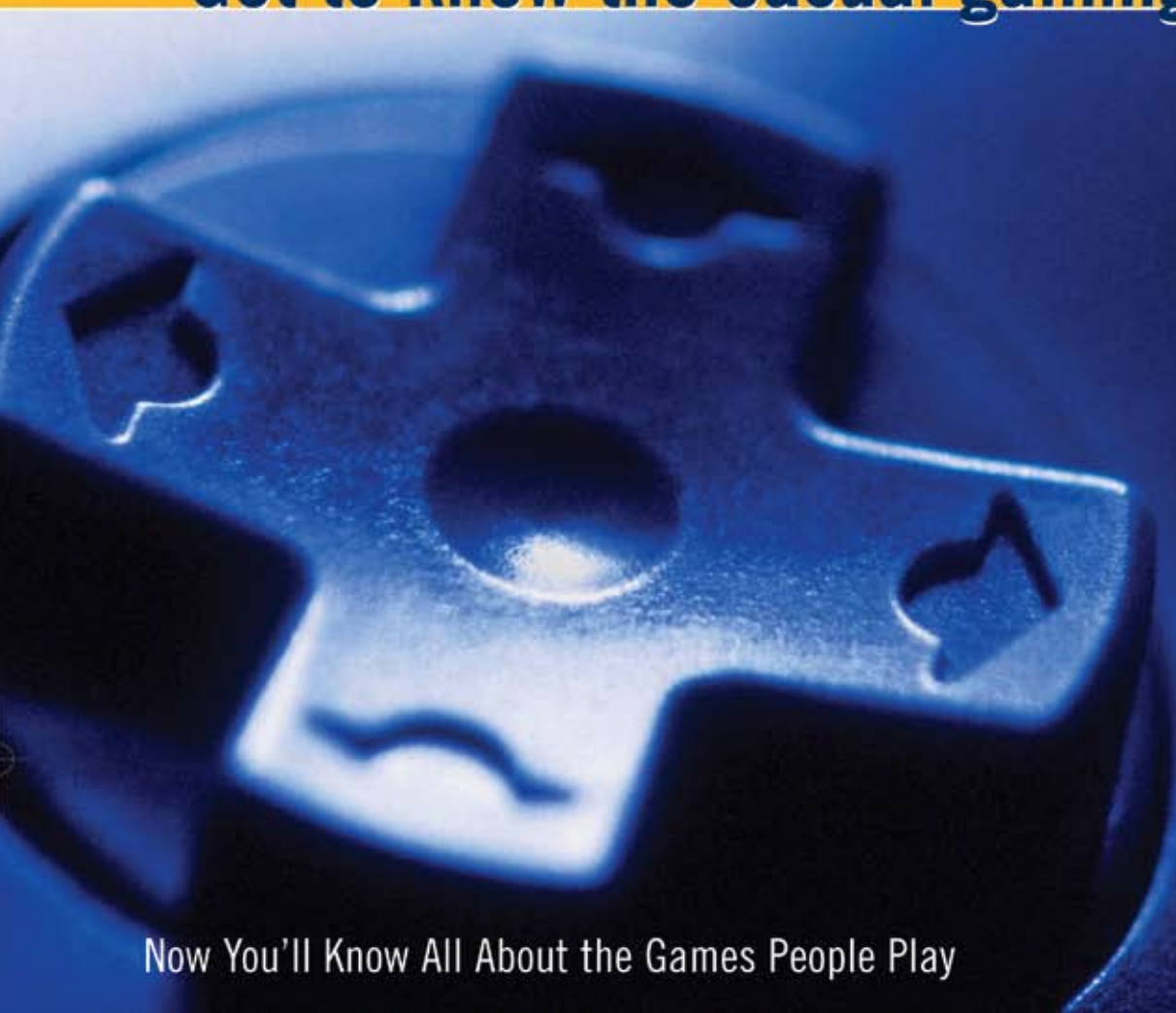
This community-based approach is what propelled the company to become the online success that it is today. In keeping pace with the ever-changing digital environment, Slingo will unveil a completely redesigned website in August 2008. The new site will offer more than just a fresh look and feel to *Slingo* fans. Streamlined navigation will make it easier than ever for visitors to locate their favorite games. *Slingo* members will also be treated to enhanced community features, as well as an improved in-site member messaging system, greater personalization capabilities on members' "MySlingo" pages, and much more.

Sal Falciglia looks back on *Slingo's* success with a mix of pride and awe. "When we first turned our attention to the online games arena, my intention was to make a game that people could relax and play. Yet we've achieved so much more than that," reflects the father of *Slingo*. "The strength of the core game concept is what's enabled Slingo to spin off in so many directions, across so many platforms. If we hadn't put in so much hard work in the early days, I doubt anyone would be talking about *Slingo* today."

Asked if he has any words of wisdom for up-and-coming game developers, Sal offers the following: "Whether you're a guy with a computer or a retiree in your basement with a Mexican slot machine, never give up on great idea. Pursue it until you perfect it."

Eric Lamendola has spent the past several years specializing in game brand development, deployment and licensing for Slingo. He has been integral in building the high-quality entertainment destination, Slingo.com, into one of the most successful sites in the casual game space. He has experience in licensing game brands to the online game space, downloadable game space, casino slot machines and table games, lottery, mobile games, interactive television, and television game shows. Eric has negotiated and closed deals that generate tens of millions of dollars in consumer sales yearly for Slingo, Inc. Eric has also designed and produced over 30 web and downloadable titles including the award winning *Slingo Quest*. Contact him at eric.lamendola@casualconnect.org

Get to know the casual gaming market



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NPD's Video Games Industry Analyst, Anita Frazier, dissected the data and analyzed the trends. She's ready to present a complete look at the U.S. online and retail games market and the video games consumer.

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Make Your Marketing Pop

Five Simple Ways to Improve Any Game's Chance of Success

Scott Steinberg

We've all heard the horror stories: Conversion rates on try-and-buy games are shrinking; cash advances are dwindling; and portals are fast-flooding with countless look-alike offerings from an increasingly overcrowded pool of international developers. But cheer up. Despite the doom and gloom permeating the industry, even those swift to label casual games "dead" will quickly confirm: There's always room for solid, innovative product in the marketplace. Having self-published several successful family-friendly titles and counseled industry leaders from EA to Eidos on making and marketing mainstream games, here are several simple tips we've found for making buyers, and business partners, sit up and take notice.

Create a Singular Identity

It's an age-old debate: What's more important: graphics or game-play? The answer—neither. As crucial as solid delivery is the establishment of an immediately identifiable audiovisual hook. Consider the chic vibe of *Jojo's Fashion Show,* the colorful cartoon aesthetic of *Garden Defense,* or the helium-voiced Giggles of *Magic Match.* Observe how each game jumps off the virtual rack. With hundreds of rivals competing for buyers' interest, employing a singular art style or sonic shtick keeps you from getting lost in the shuffle. At the same time, it also creates a handy mnemonic device that helps consumers more easily recall franchises when it comes time to shop for the token sequel.

Use Original Business Models

Hawking high-quality amusements that support cheap, episodic expansions; giving titles away free so that you can serve millions of in-game ads; creating Facebook- or Bebo-specific ports of flagship franchises to create brand awareness and drive additional shoppers to your website. The choices here are limitless, but the principle is singular: If you want to increase return on investment and attract more potential fans (and financiers), you must find greater—and more inventive—ways to monetize your wares. In short, the more methods you discover (or invent) to make money off of each game, the greater the potential windfall—and trade support—you'll see on the back-end.

Avoid the Unfamiliar

Certainly, spaceship shooters and head-scratching puzzlers starring slimy beetles sell in small quantities. But you're almost 100% guaranteed to move more units of any game that uses familiar, real-world activities as a foundation. No fancy promotional tricks here, just simple psychology: Consumers, pressed for time and money, routinely gravitate towards products which speak to their interests. Want to connect with the average parent shopping at Wal-Mart or iWin.com? Can the high-concept, unfamiliar themes, and instead go with what they already know and take comfort in.

Shake Things Up

Thousands of desktop diversions let you match patterns, test your IQ, or find hidden objects. So what's to make today's choosier enthusiast stop and give yours a glance? Introduce a new, arresting feature (or two or three) that should be built into every game produced. A couple of recent examples come to mind: *StoneLoops of Jurassica* reinvented the marble-blasting formula by merely letting you pull ammo from advancing chains, while *Posh Boutique* turbo-charged the time management genre by making you select the fashions patrons race to collect. Such features were evolutionary, not revolutionary, but they were easy to communicate and had a meaningful impact on on-screen action.

Employ Better Branding

Games have just two or three seconds to grab shoppers' attention, ensuring that the most successful titles will always keep messaging simple and paint an instant picture in viewers' minds. *Virtual Villagers. Hidden Expedition. Dream Day Wedding.*

Note how all three titles immediately convey their value proposition. The lesson here: Package and present games to captivate and reinforce specific themes. What's more, use screenshots, color palettes, supporting text, and in-game characterization to push personality rather than technical performance. At the same time, you'll notice that strong, sympathetic heroes (such as *Diner Dash's* Flo) bolster buyer empathy and increase overall marketability—while building spin-off potential as well.

Scott Steinberg is the author of *Videogame Marketing and PR,* (FREE at www.SellMoreVideogames.com) and managing director of game industry experts Embassy Multimedia Consultants. A self-publisher of PC/console titles, he also wrote the book on game journalism, *The Videogame Style Guide and Reference Manual.* One of the industry's most prolific authors and radio/TV hosts, Scott has contributed to 300-plus outlets from ABC, CBS and CNN to the *LA Times, NY Times, Playboy* and *Rolling Stone.* Between games, books, videos, articles and audio commentary, over 1 billion consumers have looked to him for expert insight and advice. Email scott.steinberg@casualconnect.org

Copyrights and Trademarks

(Almost) Everything You Need to Know

Jeanne Hamburg

For developers and publishers to maximize the revenues they enjoy from their independent, original creative works, it is invaluable to learn how to prevent others from wholesale or piecemeal copying of those works or misleading the public by using confusingly similar brands and characters.

In my work as an intellectual property attorney I've gained some insight into the unique aspects of trademark and copyright law as they apply to casual games. So here are my thoughts on how developers and publishers can obtain rights in their games and how they can enforce those rights.

Copyrights

What is a copyright and what elements of a video game does it protect?

A copyright actually comprises a group of rights, and not one single right. These rights include the right to copy, distribute, display, and perform, as well as the right to make "derivative works" (works different from, but based on, the original work the copyright protects). Copyright protects both the source code of a video game, which is considered an original, textual work, and the audiovisual elements of the game, sometimes referred to as the "look-and-feel" of the game. Copyright can also cover game characters. Copyright will never cover "the rules of the game." Someone other than the owner of copyright in the game is free to create a new game, with the same rules, if it is based on different source code and does not copy any protectable expression from the original game (that is, the new game uses entirely different graphics, sounds, characters, etc.)

Who is the owner of copyright?

The "author" or creator of a work owns copyright. However, when the individual who creates the game does so as part of his or her employment, the employer owns copyright. That is called a "work made for hire." A work made for hire may also exist (and the employer will own copyright) when an independent contractor creates the audiovisual elements of a game and signs a "work made for hire" agreement. Also, the original owner or creator (such as the game developer) may "assign" its entire copyright to a game publisher, in which case the publisher becomes the owner. But 30 years after the "assignment" the developer can "revoke" the grant so it has the opportunity to make money again from exploitation of the game. This right of termination is especially useful from the original developer's standpoint if it turns out the game is more famous or valuable than anyone anticipated when the developer assigned the copyright.

How long does copyright last?

Currently, the term of copyright is the author's life plus 70 years for a work that is not a work made for hire. The term of copyright in a work made for hire is the shorter of 120 years from creation of the work, or 95 years from its first publication.

Trademarks

What is a trademark and how can owners of rights in video games benefit from trademark law?

Unlike a copyright, a trademark protects a brand name, slogan, design, or anything (including sounds, shapes and characters) that denotes a single source of the video game (that is, the publisher or developer of the game, depending on who owns the brand, which in turn depends on who's selling the game).

How long do trademarks last?

As long as the video game is being sold.

What unique aspects of trademark and copyright law apply to video games?

A lot of people do not realize the complementary and sometimes overlapping protection afforded by these two very different forms of ownership. For example, the original music for a game is both copyrightable and can potentially function as a trademark. On the other hand, a game title will never be copyrightable but it can be a trademark. Game characters can be both trademarks and copyrights.

> "Here are my thoughts on how developers and publishers can obtain rights in their games."

What can be done to protect graphics and characters, the whole of the game, and packaging?

Generally it is wise to file copyright applications for packaging and unique graphics and characters as well as for the entire game. Trademark applications can be filed for game titles and characters.

Enforcement

How can these intellectual property rights be enforced?

Most enforcement involves a game developer or publisher "policing" its own property rights. In fact, if you don't police your rights, you can lose them. Generally, writing letters asking people to stop infringing your rights is enough to stop the violations. But sometimes a lawsuit is in order.

Are the laws governing video game copyrights and trademarks universal?

Copyright law is territorial. That is, the U.S. copyright law applies only in this country and not abroad. So sometimes what would be a copyright violation here is not considered one abroad.

What protection exists in other countries? Are rights as favorable as those of the U.S. in protecting the look-and-feel of video games?

Due to a treaty called the Berne Convention, in many countries the rights under copyright are co-extensive with those in the U.S. However, in "common law countries" (that is, those like the U.S. in which courts interpret legislation), some courts have been unwilling to recognize that the look-and-feel of games is protected. In this respect, U.S. law is generally more favorable to game publishers and developers than the law of other nations.

Process: Cost-benefit Analysis

How can developers and publishers obtain rights under trademark and copyright law in their games?

By registering those rights with the U.S. Trademark and Copyright Offices. Although in the case of trademarks registration is not required, registration gives rise to a "presumption" of nationwide rights. What this means is that the trademark owner does not have to establish actual sales of merchandise or services bearing the mark in every state in the nation. Its rights are deemed to exist as of the date of registration. Copyright registration, although not a precondition to the existence of rights, is a prerequisite for bringing a lawsuit for copyright infringement and for certain kinds of "automatic" damages of up to $150,000 per infringement. These damages are called "statutory" damages and one does not need to prove lost profits or the infringer's gained profits from the infringement in order to establish them as they are set by the court. Also, although you are not required to use a copyright registration symbol (©)—which is typically followed by the year of publication and the name of the copyright claimant—it is recommended as a warning to infringers that the content is protected and should not be stolen. Use of a copyright notice can also help establish willfulness of an infringement, increasing the statutory damages available to the copyright owner.

What costs are associated with this process?

Filing an application for copyright registration generally costs less than $100, and filing a trademark application can range in cost from several hundred dollars to more—especially if a clearance search is done.

Do video game publishers and developers need an attorney to register copyrights and trademarks?

Though it will increase the cost somewhat, most attorneys work on "flat fee" schedules for trademark and copyright application work and can ensure that you are well-positioned to enforce your rights and that you don't make mistakes (like exposing yourself to a lawsuit by using a mark someone else already owns). That old adage "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" really applies here.

Why should video game developers and publishers consider pursuing copyrights and trademarks?

Ownership of intangible assets like copyrights increases the value of your company by many, many times over because you essentially establish a lawful monopoly to exploit your work—and that can be very valuable to others. It also enables you to charge more in royalties because you can provide this important evidence of your rights. Additionally, ownership of these rights, especially as they are evidenced by U.S. registrations, can provide a strong disincentive to those who might otherwise try to copy your brands and copyrightable expression in your video games.

Jeanne Hamburg is a member of Norris McLaughlin & Marcus, P.A., a 115-attorney, full-service law firm. From its offices in New York and New Jersey, the firm represents clients around the nation and the globe. Jeanne is a member of the Intellectual Property Group, one of the largest practice groups in the firm. She has expertise in all aspects of copyright and trademark law, both in litigation and in the transactional area. She has particular expertise in representing video game publishers and developers in protecting and enforcing rights in their games, as well as in licensing those rights for a wide array of platforms. Jeanne has also negotiated and drafted for her video game clients releases for film and television "product placement" and licenses of rights to develop characters, based upon such games, for use in motion pictures. Jeanne can be reached at jeanne.hamburg@casualconnect.org

"Ownership of intangible assets like copyrights increases the value of your company by many, many times over."

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Bring It All Together

It is Time to Embrace Multi-content Distribution

Agnes Heydari

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the advantages of purchasing digital content online: More than two-thirds of software buyers say they prefer downloading a digital product rather than buying a physical product, and a number of analysts forecast that this trend will grow to 80% by 2010. Digital distribution could reach up to 40% of the PC game market (1.2 billion Euros in Europe) within the next four years (source: Médiamétrie).

Legal download of e-content is developing in all segments (software, video games, music). In France, for example, game download portals draw nearly eight million Internet users who visit them nine times per month on average (source: Médiamétrie). A separate survey by IDATE (Institute of Audiovisual and Telecommunications in Europe) forecasts that the downloaded music market, which was estimated at 99 million Euros in 2006, will reach 270 million Euros by 2010. IDATE also reports that in France 49% of those surveyed legally download content. That figure reaches 59% in the UK and 66% in the USA.

The Multi-content Approach to Digital Distribution

As a result of the growing interest in downloadable content, portals, e-merchant sites, publishers, and content providers are all on the move to offer new multi-content and download services to their online and mobile customers. These services enable their customers to acquire a variety of digital entertainment—software, games, and music—all from a single, centralized source. Both PC and mobile content can be downloaded from the same, multi-content distributor. These services both simplify and direct the search for digital entertainment while allowing portal and e-merchant partners to fully benefit from the "long tail" of their extended catalogs.

Building a download distribution platform is a whole process that extends from the creation of the master file, through product referencing, pricing, and DRM, to sales administration, delivery of activation codes, and customer service. Once built, such platforms can simultaneously accommodate multiple monetization models: buy-and-download, try-and-buy, subscription—even advertising-supported games. The model that works best depends largely on the product: The subscription-based model, for example, is best for moving back-catalog items, whereas the buy-and-download model allows Internet users to access new games and blockbusters more quickly.

> "More than two-thirds of software buyers say they prefer downloading a digital product rather than buying a physical product."

Multi-content: The Response to New Consumer Behavior

Multi-content download distribution was created in response to the demands and expectations of online consumers. The aggregation of digital content from different universes thus opens up new channels through which a variety of digital products can be acquired simply and legally.

The multi-content approach is a boon to developers inasmuch as it allows them to take advantage of cutting-edge technology and e-commerce expertise to enhance their cross-marketing efforts and extend the lives of their products.

Publishers also benefit from the multi-content approach due to its low cost and simplicity. With digital distribution, you don't have to pay for all the necessary resources at retail, and you don't have unsold stock to manage. Moreover, revenue-sharing policies enable a publisher to create and manage an e-store without any initial investment.

Agnes Heydari is the PR & Communication Manager at Nexway, where she is primarily responsible for the development of Nexway brand image in media and the entertainment industry. Prior to this position, she was involved in IT management and telecommunications marketing. She holds a Master's Degree in Marketing. Email address: agnes.heydari@casualconnect.org

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Pay-for-Play Is Where the Action Is

The Growth of Out-of-Home Casual Gaming

In this issue, we have included a number of high-level overview articles for the coin-op, set-top box, and out-of-home gaming markets. To get the most out of the articles in this section, you will want to keep a search engine handy to look up names and products you might not be familiar with. –ed

Kevin Williams

Although it is often overlooked and underestimated, Out-of-Home (OOH) interactive entertainment (sometimes simply referred to as amusement) actually embodies Casual Gaming in the way it entertains. The most popular of the Casual Game styles is the classic or retro arcade game, from Namco's *Pac-Man* to Taito's *Space Invaders*. These fundamental classic games have now been copied or licensed for mobile phone, PC emulator, and home console application. The success of *Pac-Man Championship Edition* on the Xbox Live Arcade network is yet another reminder of the prominent role that amusement still plays in the world of casual entertainment.

Thanks to new technology, OOH continues to benefit from the development of simple but compelling game-play. The popularity of arcade games in bars and restaurants has exploded with the introduction of new touch-screen game-kiosks for both table- and bar-top. Some of these simple Flash-style games are networked to provide multi-venue game tournaments for prizes. As an indication of the market's hunger for new content, European manufacturer PhotoPlay has already installed over 100,000 connected terminals.

Another American manufacturer, Incredible Technologies has been a market success story with their series of *Golden Tee* golf products. Although it started as a rudimentary trackball golf game, *Golden Tee* has become a favorite in sports bars, with thousands of registered, card-carrying players competing in international tournaments for thousands of dollars in prize money.

Recognizing the opportunity that OOH represents, another arcade legend—Eugene Jarvis—has formed a major amusement studio (Raw Thrills) to bring his experience developing for Midway to the current amusement scene. Along with conventional driving titles, the company has taken a sport shooting game and made it an institution. The *Big Buck* series personifies all that is Casual Gaming, with the latest version featuring hunts for wild animals in Africa. Because the game is so easy to learn and fun to watch, *Big Buck* has always been able to attract large groups of players and spectators, making it a tavern and bar owner's dream.

As a further extension of OOH casual gaming, uWink has introduced a chain of restaurants which features a new Electronic Point-of-Sale (e-POS) gaming system. Originated by industry legend Nolan Bushnell, uWink Bistro features a touch-screen terminal at every table through which customers place their orders and play a variety of interactive games.

uWink recognizes that the eat-drink-and-play concept requires a special kind of game experience—one which provides a ready supply of fun and compelling challenges that encourage table-to-table connections and tournament (social gaming) competition. The company has created a RFID swipe card payment

> "The opportunity has never been greater for small studios to share in the revenue generated in the new style of e-payment amusement applications."

Pay-for-Play Is Where the Action Is

The Growth of Out-of-Home Casual Gaming

infrastructure to simplify payments (and increase revenue). The first uWink Bistro site opened in California last year, with others soon to follow.

Meanwhile, others are experimenting with simple but compelling game applications beyond amusement, including interactive theme park attractions and new architectures such as ExerGaming and EduTainment. Although not conventional amusement platforms, these new concepts use Casual Game methodologies to shape the playing experience.

It is in this environment that amusement terminal manufacturers are hiring Flash developers and licensing their content for application in the OOH market. The best Flash game-houses that have honed their craft in developing internet-based Flash games are now encouraged to enter the pay-for-play scene and place their games in OOH venues. The opportunity has never been greater for small studios to share in the revenue generated in the new style of e-payment amusement applications.

Perhaps then it is not surprising that consumer software developers are now looking to extend their brands with arcade versions of their console titles. Consumer publishers such as Activision, UbiSoft, and Electronic Arts have all licensed arcade versions of their popular properties with the hope of reaching an untapped OOH audience. Thus Casual Gaming has come full circle, returning enthusiastically to its arcade roots.

Kevin Williams is founder and director of the out-of-home interactive entertainment consultancy KWP Limited (www.thestingerreport.com/kwp.html). His extensive years in the global video amusement and hi-tech attractions industry includes top management and design posts, with special focus on new technology development and applications. A well-known speaker on the industry and its technology, he pens an extensive number of articles. He is also the editor and publisher of The Stinger Report, a leading industry e-Newsletter (free to subscribers) and web-based information service. Email him at kevin.williams@casualconnect.org

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Digital TV: The Optimal Platform for Casual Games

Set-top Box Game Networks Are Redefining Branded Content

In this issue, we have included a number of high-level overview articles for the coin-op, set-top box, and out-of-home gaming markets. To get the most out of the articles in this section, you will want to keep a search engine handy to look up names and products you might not be familiar with. –ed

Jeff Zie

Gaining billions of downloads every year, dedicated casual games networks are now broadcast to millions of TV homes via digital satellite and cable platforms across the globe. With the majority of TV viewers now interacting with their service on a regular basis and the imminent, seamless integration of TV and the Internet, could digital TV become the optimal platform for casual gaming?

Gaming first appeared via TV broadcasts about a decade ago during the dawn of the UK's digital era. Freeing up bandwidth space allowed broadcasters to transmit additional information across the airwaves, facilitating greater opportunities to interact with their viewers. Primarily designed for TV viewing, set-top box technology was limited; so developers produced simple casual games such as *Darts* and *Solitaire* that would function easily on the interactive platform. One of the first such channels to appear was PlayJam, which originated as a side project of London-based visual media company Static 2358. PlayJam first launched on digital satellite services in France and the UK, providing both free and pay-per-play, prized-based games to their viewers. The results were astonishing. Attracting over one-third of Sky's 5.2 million subscribers per week, with each averaging three visits per week, PlayJam secured 22.5 million plays per month. PlayJam repeated its success on French service Canal Sat: 47% of their subscribers played every week, with 55% staying on the network for 25 minutes or more. As the marketplace began to recognize its take-up and technological capabilities, PlayJam soon became one of the most highly rated brands on digital TV.

Both PlayJam and Sky's interactive gaming portal Gamestar now offer powerful interactive branding solutions for media clients, providing exciting and attractive promotional content that actively engages viewers—in contrast to more traditional, passive TV advertising. For example, the games often assist with the launch of new products such as albums or TV series. To promote the launch of the animated feature film *Ant Bully,* for instance, Warner Brothers commissioned Static to develop a themed game. Research conducted on a sample group of Sky viewers aged seven-to-17 found that 35% of those were aware of the game and 9% had played it. Needless to say, advertisers are very interested in the services' ability to target specific audiences while also providing a measured game-play response.

Cartoon Network asked Sky to create a range of games based on their popular programs in order to raise the profile of their channel. Sky Gamestar created a specially branded Cartoon Network section on their portal, presenting favorites *Johnny Bravo* and *The Powerpuff Girls* alongside classics *Tom and Jerry* and *Scooby Doo.* The venture has proved highly successful thanks to three key factors:

- Faithful and respectful treatment of the content
- A sense of fun and excitement
- Special high-score and prize promotions

As a result, Cartoon Network has garnered over 10 million CN game-plays over a four-year period.

These set-top game networks benefit viewers, broadcasters, and brands alike. The shift towards free-to-play games now provides added-value for viewers and sticky content for broadcasters—the sort of content brands will gladly pay to have developed. What's more, scheduled game broadcasts now make it possible for the portals to lure viewers according to their TV-viewing habits, with something to attract all family members. The largest user segment—females aged 35-plus—typically play bingo, wordplay games and puzzles during weekday afternoons; on weekday evenings, you'll find young males playing arcade, casino and sports games; and on weekends kids take up branded games.

Meanwhile, the space continues to grow. PlayJam games are now available in over 55 million TV homes in the UK, USA, India, Italy, South Africa, the Netherlands and Malaysia—with further growth promised down the road.

As brands and developers discover the potential of casual gaming on Digital TV, the medium really could prove to be the optimal platform for generating significant revenue with casual games. The ultimate success of the medium will largely depend on the ability of PlayJam and others to find new ways for advertisers to use casual games to connect with their audiences. In fact, many believe that the exposure to branding within a casual game on TV will be prove to be significantly more effective than traditional TV advertising.

Jeff Zie's 20 years of experience in media includes holding creative, strategic and senior management positions within Grey Advertising (HK), WPP, EMAP, Microsoft, BSkyB, Electronic Arts, and Liberty Media. Within the last 10 years, Jeff has successfully built, managed, and grown teams within large corporate and start-up environments. Career highlights include launching Sky Interactive, the UK's leading and most successful interactive/enhanced TV service, and launching PlayJam, the most successful independent interactive-TV games channel. He can be reached at jeff.zie@casualconnect.org .

To promote the launch of the animated feature film *Ant Bully,* Warner Brothers commissioned Static to develop a themed game.

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Peggle

Coin-Op Casual Games

The Unknown Billion Dollar Market

In this issue, we have included a number of high-level overview articles for the coin-op, set-top box, and out-of-home gaming markets. To get the most out of the articles in this section, you will want to keep a search engine handy to look up names and products you might not be familiar with. –ed

Mike Maas

Even though there are more than 300,000 casual game terminals spread out all over the world, most people aren't aware of the actual size and scope of the touchscreen coin-op casual game market. For over 15 years people have been spending their money—one dollar at a time—playing casual games on touchscreen systems in bars, restaurants, malls, and family fun centers. This billion-dollar market boasts sophisticated entertainment devices and scores of players looking to satiate their casual gaming addictions.

Coin-Op Business Model Today

With over 5 billion coin-op touchscreen casual game-plays a year, the industry is thriving. Most people play coin-op game machines in bars and restaurants, or other high-traffic locations.

Unlike the online casual game business model, coin-op has traditionally been a machine sale oriented model. Manufacturers produce hardware, software and game content, then sell the integrated product through distributors to operators. These operators place machines in locations with the intent of generating income to pay off the investment made and make a profit. Some manufacturers, like Merit, augment their internal game development with third party licensed game content.

The Players

Over the last 30 years, we have noticed that consumers fall into one of six player-types based on which games they enjoy playing.

- **"Hardcore Players"** are dedicated and loyal to the Megatouch brand. These players seek out and frequent locations with a Megatouch simply to play their favorite games. *Card Bandits, Luxor,* and *Card Pirates* are among the Hardcore Player's favorites.
- For the **"Hi-Score Chasers"** it's all about grabbing the #1 spot in the game rankings. *Tricky Fish, Boxxi,* and *Luxor: Survival* appeal to these players because they're all about racking up the most points possible.
- *Solitaire* proved that sometimes it's just better to play alone. Such **"Soloists"** like the solitary experience of playing games like *Texas Hold 'Em, Word Dojo,* and *Ink Rally.*
- On the flip side, there are the **"Social Players"** who love to play touchscreen games with as many friends as possible. Games like *Photo Hunt, Trivia Whiz,* and *Hollywood Match* are perfect for any group situation.
- The **"Occasional Player"** plays for some quick fun, or simply just to pass the time. These players are drawn to games like *Monkey Bash, Office Bash,* and *Draggle Drop.*
- **"Joystick Generation Players"**, while more likely to play video games at home, do enjoy casual games in a social setting as a way to relax and blow off some steam. Games ranking among the favorites with this group are *Tuxedo Run, Dodge Bull,* and *Beer Pong.*

For over 30 years, Merit has ensured long-term return on investment for operators by providing continually high-earning equipment along with updates and upgrades for its products. With an installed base of over 250,000 touchscreen games accounting for over 4 billion plays per year, Merit Entertainment is the worldwide leader in touchscreen entertainment devices. Merit Entertainment products appear globally in a wide array of venues and appeal to an almost limitless demographic. Merit continues to serve the industry with ever-increasing entertainment, content, and new games. The company maintains a Web site with all the latest information at www.meritgames.com. Mr. Maas can be reached at mike.maas@casualconnect.org.

Three of Merit Entertainment's popular touchscreen games.

Draggle Drop

Card Pirates

Luxor Survival

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The Power of the Network

How Network Technology Is Transforming Mobile Games

Mobile phones have proven to be a perfect platform for casual titles. From arcade classics to original games for mobile, casual titles dominate mobile game sales. In fact, Juniper Research estimates that end-user-generated revenues from mobile games will reach nearly $10 billion by 2009—due to the increasing popularity of casual gaming combined with a steadily increasing variety of game-friendly handsets. However, in order for this prediction to come to pass, developers and publishers must find innovative ways to design casual titles so that they entice casual gamers to begin playing mobile games and (more importantly) to keep playing them.

Recent claims suggest that GPS and touch-screens are the next big technologies to drive consumer interest in mobile gaming. The truth is that adoption and demand will continue to grow—not because of new technology, but because of how the new technology is leveraged in creating fun, interactive game-play.

One innovation that has been very successfully implemented in mobile is the use of networked components. When used effectively, the "always on" network of the cell phone can lead to increased "replayability" and provide opportunities for capturing new mobile gaming consumers. Furthermore, effective use of the network gives players access to endless content, millions of fellow players, and dynamically-updated game-play and features—all through the convenience of a cell phone.

Likewise, publishers can use network technology in a variety of ways to create games that are not only fun, but long-lasting. The success of a game is linked to the length of time consumers hang onto a particular game and how long a carrier is willing to keep a game title on its deck, making network technology a lucrative feature if used correctly.

An Old Game Made New Again—Daily

As more consumers choose to purchase mobile games, publishers and carriers face the challenge of enticing customers to hold onto their games longer. Allowing players access to continually fresh content via networked components is one of the best ways to increase the duration of the players' subscriptions. New content for a game is usually available for download on a regular schedule (daily, weekly, or monthly, depending on the game and the carrier). As a result, players may keep the game on their handsets longer because they are eagerly waiting for an update that will supply the game with fresh content.

An example of this is a trivia game that offers new questions each time the game connects to the server, giving players access to continually updated content and giving developers the ability to customize content based on themes. New trivia can also be launched based on cultural events, like Hollywood trivia around the Emmys or political trivia during a presidential election. Networked components can also be used to provide new levels, weapons, power-ups, and other bonus content.

Head-to-Head Play Complete with Smack-Talking

With millions of fellow players accessible through the network, real-time, head-to-head game-play is quickly becoming one of the most exciting and popular trends in mobile gaming. These multiplayer games allow players to compete anywhere and any time. This increases the competition and interactivity of a mobile game, creating a community of players that both publishers and carriers are looking to foster—a community in which players work as advocates for mobile games and encourage their friends to join so they can play together.

Further adding to the attraction of head-to-head play, developers now incorporate message swapping functionality into the games. Similar to the popular feature found in casual online games, players can "chat" with their competitors during the game by choosing from a list of predetermined messages that change depending on the situation. For example, in a billiards game, you can compliment an opponent's shot or taunt him when you run the table.

Bring Your A-Game

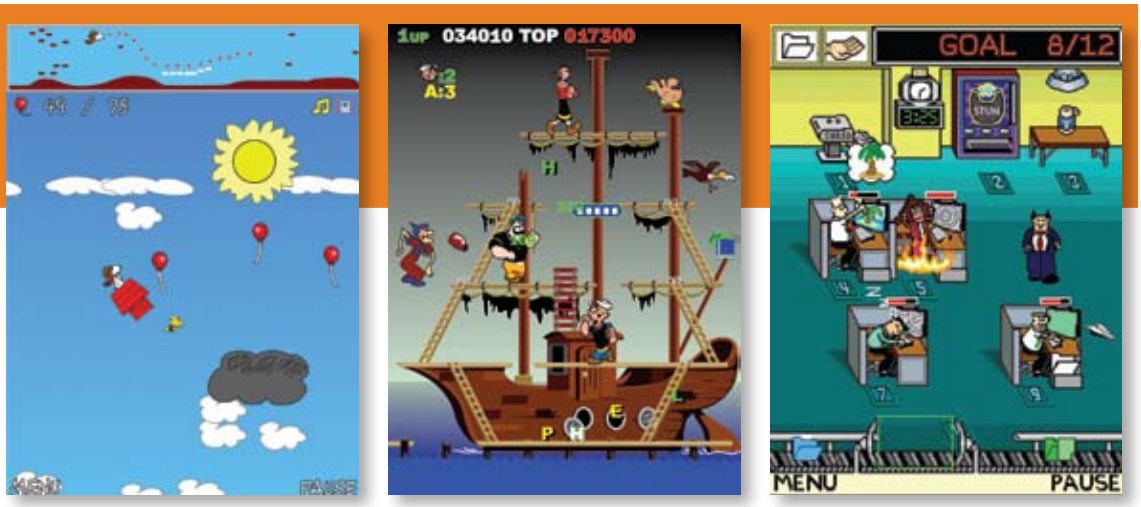
Leader boards also increase the competitive nature of a mobile gaming. Similar to earning a spot for your initials on an arcade game's high-score table or on a leader board in a PC online community, mobile carrier- and publisher-hosted leader boards are a networked feature that enhances the game experience. Now mobile players can not only post their high scores to these leader boards, but gain acclaim in game-specific categories (such as fastest lap time or the most wipeouts). Most importantly,

Scott Rubin

> By taking advantage of what makes the mobile phone unique, we can continue to promote the quality of mobile games and drive the continued growth of the casual games industry.

The Power of the Network

How Network Technology Is Transforming Mobile Games



Fans of the original Peanuts®, Popeye® and Dilbert® comic strips now have access to the original strips, downloaded directly to their mobile phones in exchange for points earned by successfully playing the game.

these leader boards extend the lifetime of the game because players continue to play, striving to reach the top of the scoreboard.

Everyone Can Be A Winner

Much like earning tickets for a stuffed animal at the arcade, mobile gaming consumers also enjoy receiving rewards for their gaming triumphs. Aside from unlockable levels and characters and a few play-for-prizes exceptions, most mobile games do not provide rewards in their games.

Namco has created an innovative method of rewarding players. It uses network components to allow consumers to download comic strips as redeemable rewards. Through this feature, fans of the original Peanuts®, Popeye® and Dilbert® comic strips now have access to the original strips, downloaded directly to their mobile phones in exchange for points earned by successfully playing the game. This has proven to be a very popular reward as hundreds of thousands of strips have been downloaded since this feature was introduced by Namco. Players have added incentive to continue playing a particular mobile title as they are continually rewarded with new comic strips. This feature, distinctive to Namco Networks' games, turns traditional media on its head by digitally distributing pre-existing content and redefining it as a reward.

When Mobile Meets PC

As noted by the Juniper Research study mentioned previously, the consumer of mobile games is similar to the consumer of PC casual games. As network technology improves, there is a logical opportunity for PC games to attract mobile consumers and vice versa. Mobile games offer PC publishers the opportunity to extend casual game brands to consumers who are looking for five minutes of fun while waiting for a friend. As networked components become faster and more effective, PC casual gamers and mobile casual gamers may even some day interact and compete with each other, blending together two formerly disparate casual platforms into one giant casual playground.

Potential of Networked Games

If the current effectiveness and popularity of networked features are any indication, the future of these kinds of games is very promising. With increasing network speeds, we can expect publishers and developers to take full advantage of the networked nature of the mobile phone. Networked features—including continually refreshed content, real-time head-to-head multiplayer gaming, and digitally-distributed prizes—all serve to encourage a mass-market audience that playing casual games on their phones is a viable entertainment choice. While network technology does not enhance all games, when used appropriately, networked components can enhance game-play and extend the lifetime of a game. By taking advantage of what makes the mobile phone unique—its portability, its ubiquity, and its networked nature—we can continue to promote the quality of mobile games and drive the continued growth of the casual games industry.

Scott Rubin, Vice President of Sales and Marketing, joined Namco Networks in early 2004. Distributing through every major carrier in North America, Namco Networks is a leading publisher and developer of wireless games and entertainment. Mr. Rubin is responsible for the overall business and marketing direction of the company, as well as maintaining relationships with strategic partners, including wireless carriers. Prior to joining Namco, Mr. Rubin was the director of business development at Sega, where he developed carrier partnerships and helped establish the mobile division, Sega Mobile, as well as oversaw the online business strategy. He can be reached at scott.rubin@casualconnect.org.

Going Mobile

Making a Casual Game Work on a Phone

Thanks to the continuing evolution of hard-drives and console systems, game developers have been relatively unconstrained for many years. Not surprisingly, the resultant trend has been to make everything bigger, flashier, bolder than before. Then along came mobile phones, with their tiny screens, puny storage and memory capacities, and awkward controls.

We couldn't help wondering: How do you make a casual game work on a device that was not originally designed for gaming? So we asked.

We talked to five mobile game experts: David McCaman, Director of Marketing at Hands-on Mobile; Matt Gillis, Senior Vice-President, Publishing at Capcom Interactive Canada; Oliver Miao, CEO at Centerscore; Francis Picard, Producer at EA Mobile; and Jason Loia, COO at Digital Chocolate. Here's what we learned.

– ed.

Jessica Tams

> We couldn't help wondering: How do you make a casual game work on a device that was not originally designed for gaming?

Guitar Hero III

- Mobile Launch: December 2007
- Publishers: Hands-On Mobile, Activision
- Developer: Machine Works NorthWest
- Key to Success: Continually adding new and updated content

What was your mindset when approaching the design of the game?

David McCaman: *Guitar Hero* game-play translates perfectly to mobile—from the addictive puzzle element to the easy-to-play but difficult-to-master mechanics that can be enjoyed in short gaming sessions when on the go. Going into the project, our goal was to make sure that the mobile version stayed as true to the console version as possible. At the same time, mobile gaming is a completely different experience from console or PC gaming and caters to consumers in a different environment.

Guitar Hero III

While staying true to the characteristics that made the game so successful in the first place, we had to make sure to adapt the game properly for the mobile platform.

How did you ensure you did not alienate Guitar Hero's fans?

McCaman: While we wanted to create new and interesting content, we also wanted the mobile version to truly feel like part of the *Guitar Hero* series. The fans from the console version can choose any of their favorite *Guitar Hero* characters and play in three popular venues. In addition, they can shred on four authentic guitars to tracks that are popular across all current versions of the console series.

While we knew we could deliver on the franchise's signature game-play, we no longer had the ubiquitous guitar controller, which meant we would have to appeal to gamers in other ways. So, we focused on high quality music, stunning graphics, a robust content delivery system and connected features. Then to replace the guitar's game-play mechanic, the mobile game requires players to hit the number keys on the handset in sync with colored notes that appear on a scrolling fret board.

How did your connected features set you apart?

McCaman: When you first start up *Guitar Hero III Mobile,* you have instant access to 15 songs—which gives you a significant amount of game-play. While this resulted in an adequate launch, we wanted to add even more content to make our game really stand out. We wanted to give our players that top quality experience they expect from the *Guitar Hero* franchise so that they would continue to enjoy the game for a long, long time. Our connected system allows players to download three new playable tracks each month without additional cost. Players can eventually add up to 36 new songs which results in a total of over 150 unique levels of game-play.

I believe the key to our success with this title has been the new and updated content—it keeps people coming back, with plenty of their favorite song options to keep them engaged.

Is providing a connected experience going to become a do-or-die situation in mobile games?

McCaman: The future of mobile games is in evolution, and connectedness is critical. While many titles have succeeded with unconnected, repeat game-play, Hands-On Mobile believe gamers want new experiences in addition to the fun, addictive elements. There is so much content out there right now, no matter what platform we are talking about. People rarely consume the same piece of content more than once, so the key to success is to offer more through additional downloadable content, multiplayer competition, and communities. These expectations are met in all other digital gaming arenas, from consoles to the web. It is our goal to expand the market and give mobile gamers more—in value, fun, and positive experiences.

Going Mobile

Making a Casual Games Work on a Phone

Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?

- Mobile Launch: October 2007
- Publishers: Fox Mobile and Capcom Interactive, Inc.
- Developer: Capcom Interactive Canada
- Key to Success: Caffeine and experience

What was your mindset approaching the follow-up for such a popular TV Show?

Matt Gillis: We started by distilling the great and unique elements of the show down to the core essence of the brand, and then we incorporated those elements into the design of the mobile game. To complete the experience of the show, we also incorporated sound effects from the show itself.

Were there any design challenges you encountered?

Gillis: It's a unique opportunity to work with a fun game that has already been created. The challenge comes from adapting the existing experience to the mobile platform. Thankfully our experience with the *Millionaire* franchise gave us the benefit of a well-tuned design process.

What did you do special for the mobile version of* Are You Smarter Than A 5th Grader*? to keep it fresh and exciting for even the most devoted fans?

Gillis: To help capture the spirit of the franchise and keep the experience fresh, questions were developed by combing over textbooks and consulting a few teachers fifth-grade teachers. We ended up with more than 800 questions spanning 12 subjects that players may encounter as they work their way towards the million-dollar question. Then, unlike most other trivia games, our game does not reveal the correct answer if you guess incorrectly. (This extends the replay-ability of the game.) Just like the TV show, power-ups enable you to "peek," "copy," and "save" the answers of simulated students when you're unsure of an answer. Then if you choke and answer a question incorrectly, you must utter the unenviable phrase: "I'm not smarter than a 5th grader."

Surviving High School

- Mobile Launch: September 2005
- Publisher: Vivendi Games Mobile
- Developer: Centerscore
- Key to Success: Lots of things going wrong to make a game that somehow worked out right

What prompted you to develop an original IP?

Oliver Miao: When Centerscore decided to create *Surviving High School,* the mobile games space was going crazy with licensed titles. Multiple VC-funded companies were throwing money at licensors, which drove licensing fees for strong brands into the stratosphere. Since the mobile games marketplace was becoming saturated with licensed games, we saw an opportunity to differentiate our company by focusing on high-quality, original games.

How did you come up the design for this game?

Miao: Originally, a partner of ours asked us to create a social-based game. This prompted us to fill up a whiteboard with subject matters that we thought everyone could relate to. This led us to the subject of "high school." When we presented the idea to them, they expressed interest, but ultimately they chose another company's idea. So instead, we moved full speed ahead and opened bank loans to support the development of our own innovative, social-based game.

A text-based game seems counterintuitive for the 21st century. Why did you choose that as the design?

Miao: At first, the game was going to be an RPG, but the game's designers thought that an RPG would still be too hardcore for our target audience. They decided to make the game text-driven with simple choices. This allows players to get totally immersed in the story while providing familiar and intuitive controls—nearly everyone knows how to read and choose between options.

How did you decide on doing episodic content?

Miao: Cell phone game revenues were heavily driven by monthly recurring subscriptions. We thought that releasing new content on a monthly basis would be a great way to increase retention rates. So we built a mechanism for recurring downloadable content into the game.

In a twist of fate, it was a good thing we had built the ability to download content into the game because two weeks before the game launched, we learned that the game was too big for Verizon to take it. We did a mad rush to chop the content of the game into smaller chunks. These chunks became our first downloadable episodes and a huge success.

So why do you think episodic content works?

Miao: If you create a great game, mobile is the perfect platform for episodic content. First, you have an easy billing mechanism—when players buy the game, the charge appears on their monthly cell phone bill. Second, cell phones are naturally connected to the network.

Tell a good story and players will come back every week for more. *Surviving High School* is at the intersection of widely popular media—TV and games. It combines the weekly episodic nature of TV with the interactive involvement of games.

Bejeweled

- Mobile Launch: August 2007
- Publishers: PopCap Games and EA Mobile
- Developer: EA Mobile Montreal
- Key to Success: Extreme casual game-play—true to the spirit of the *Bejeweled* brand

What was your mindset approaching the follow-up for such a popular game?

Francis Picard: We wanted an enhance *Bejeweled* to extend the game's legacy as one of the most prominent titles in casual mobile gaming. With this new version of *Bejeweled* we aimed to set new standards for graphical quality in the mobile arena. We combined all the features of the popular single-player classic version with the acclaimed, networked, multiplayer function to create the definitive Bejeweled mobile game.

How did you ensure you did not alienate Bejeweled fans?

Picard: *Bejeweled Multiplayer* is a true adaptation of the PC game. Enthusiastic players get the full *Bejeweled* experience, not a diluted adaptation.

Given that this is the third Bejeweled mobile game, what did you do to keep it fresh and exciting for consumers?

Picard: We focused on the following features that enhanced this version of *Bejeweled:*

- State-of-the-art visual effects
- Realistic sounds—feel the game move, shake and explode
- Real-time, one-on-one competitive play
- Animated tutorials for easy fun

Do you think the mobile platform will become more important in the next couple of years?

Picard: Mobile gaming has proven to be a lucrative business, and the continuing opportunity in mobile creation is huge. In fact, the mobile games market has been predicted to reach $13.5 billion by 2012. The advancement and addition of many different kinds of mobile devices to the marketplace—like iPods, Smartphones, and the iPhone—gives developers the chance to bring a much better game experience to consumers, and thus drive more downloads. EA Mobile is committed to all innovation on the mobile platform and will continue to do so in the future.

Rollercoaster Rush

- Mobile Launch: July 2006
- Publisher: Digital Chocolate
- Developer: Digital Chocolate
- Key to Success: Let the good times roll! *RollerCoaster Rush* gives you the throttle control from the get-go. No annoying track setup, no multi-button hassle, no 48-page manual, just give it some gas let her rip.

Digital Chocolate creates original IP almost exclusively. Why?

Jason Loia: From the outset we have always focused on inventing our own IP. This is the longer, more difficult road to take but in the end it's what makes content truly come alive on the platform it was intended for. This is especially true in mobile where many publishers may rely on a strong license from another platform for success—as opposed to designing a game from the ground up for mobile. With the latter approach, we end up spending all our efforts and resources on the game and not on the license, and our high game review scores year after year confirm that we're giving the consumer the best games possible.

How did you make sure that even casual users were able to control the coaster?

Loia: Our Studio in Helsinki is the best in the world at mastering casual game-play on mobile. We take into account the typical session duration, a player's focus/intensity budget, the tempo of mobile, and the device's constraints and controls. Accordingly, one-button game-play was designed in from the beginning, resulting in the simple, but all-too-effective, Throttle/Brake controls in *RollerCoaster Rush.* That design philosophy is also visible in many of our other hit titles such as *Tower Bloxx* and *Mini Golf 99 Holes,* where you need only your thumb to play the entire game.

Will you be adding user-generated content? Do you think this is something that the casual user is looking for?

Loia: User-generated-content (UGC) can be one of the most powerful ways of involving the player community; yet it also can introduce a certain amount of hard-core flavor into the game. Most casual gamers don't want to create the game content so much as consume it. There are exceptions (such as casual social games) in which UGC can in fact become the game-play itself, but for a casual action game, creating level data may not be everyone's cup of tea. That said, *RollerCoaster Rush* is a game that begs for a level editor, and Digital Chocolate may release one soon. Check our website for more info.

How important are mobile platforms to your corporate strategy? Will you be bringing the game to other platforms?

Loia: Digital Chocolate has always had its roots in mobile games, and this has served us well in creating casual, innovative, and massively popular games for the mobile market. We are realizing that because of these very qualities, our games work well (fortunately) on a wide variety of other platforms as well, including the web. *RollerCoaster Rush,* for example, has had many millions of game-play sessions on the web since its launch in April of this year (play it at www.digitalchocolate.com). This success on the web, in turn, allows us to drive traffic to the carrier game-decks and get new users to discover and try out mobile content. Digital Chocolate's multi-platform approach is one that we hope will benefit fans of our games everywhere, regardless of where they choose to play them.

Fresh Options

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2) Are you getting a fair royalty?
Realistic royalties run 20% - 70% of revenues received, depending on your development and advances.

3) Do your royalties cover any and all revenue-generating opportunities?
You should receive royalties from every distribution channel.

4) If you developed a game, do you retain all IP rights?
If you fully funded and created a game, you should retain all rights.

5) If your Publisher is unable to distribute or publish to a specific channel or platform, are you allowed to pursue those opportunities on your own?
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Give Your Fans a Forum

Building a Casual Game Community in Three Simple Steps

Nathan Fahrenthold

I began my career building communities in the late '90s at Mplayer.com, an online, PC-game matchmaking service. Our primary games were hard core titles like *Quake 2, Rainbow 6,* and *Total Annihilation*. The community around these PC games came together on the web primarily to build and discuss modifications of their favorite games. Another, smaller contingency of community members were clan members who got together to talk smack with other clans and discuss strategy.

As core games have matured and moved toward the console, these communities have moved away from the web and into the walled communities offered by the Xbox Live and Sony Online networks. These closed systems offer many of the same features of the early community websites, including chatting, scheduling matches, and downloading game modifications (though now at a price—and without allowing the community to create its own modifications).

Almost without exception, casual game publishers and their websites owners have never developed large communities dedicated to their games or websites—or to the industry in general, for that matter. And that's a missed opportunity. Even though building a community costs money and is a headache, the benefits far outweigh the costs. The benefits of an engaged community include:

- *More Revenue*—Engaged community members spend more time on your site chatting, viewing ads, and downloading your games.
- *Lower Re-engagement Costs*—Casual gamers tend to flock to their favorite franchises and game brands. If there is a dry period between releases of their favorite game, marketing dollars must be spent to re-engage consumers and bring them back to your site.

  Cementing this population to your site with strong community features does away with this need. Fans will visit your site more often to view message board announcements and to find out about new products.
- *Higher Retention*—Once a user has created a profile, built a network of friends, and made his home on your site, migrating to another site has a high switching cost. The user becomes part of a family on the site and will tend to stick with it through dry periods of content or other issues.

With that, allow me to share with you three easy, inexpensive steps to building a casual game community.

Step 1: Build Message Boards

People aren't a community until they can talk to each other. Many casual game publishers talk about the size of their "community," but people playing one-hour game trials with no way to talk to each other isn't a community.

The number one way to engage and get a community talking is through message boards. Message boards (sometimes called forums) are also the cheapest community-building tool available.

Typically free or very low cost, message boards offer a number of benefits:

- *A Gathering Place*—Without a central location for like-minded people to meet and chat, a community will never grow.

The number one way to engage and get a community talking is through message boards....the cheapest community-building tool available.

Message boards offer your community a gathering place for discussions in an asynchronous manner. They eliminate time zone problems and allow users to chat about issues important to them over a period of time.

- *A Feedback Channel*—Forums enable people to tell you what they think about your site and the games you offer: This is probably the most forbidding aspect of message boards: exposing yourself and your company to criticism in a public forum. My argument against this fear is that people will always find a way to complain about you—even if it means posting their gripes on your competitors' message boards. By hosting and moderating your own boards, you can answer complaints instantly and moderate the threads to ensure the conversation stays on topic. Users typically like to vent and will move on when answered by a company rep (even if it isn't the answer they were looking for). When complaints happen on an outside board and aren't controlled, they can quickly spiral out of control and create a PR nightmare.

Give Your Fans a Forum

Building a Casual Game Community in Three Simple Steps

- *A Customer Support Mechanism*—Who doesn't like free customer support? While not a replacement for customer support, message boards can cut way down on CS tickets by creating a forum on which users can post inquiries. Other community members who have run into these same issues can often help solve the problem. There is typically a small group of people on all message boards who love helping others (see Community Leaders later in the article).
- *A Cheap, Accurate Marketing Research Supplier*—Anyone who has ever conducted a research study knows how expensive and inaccurate such studies can be. Market research companies charge thousands of dollars to ask the same questions that you can ask on your message boards. When you launch a game, posting a simple thread asking users what they think can provide valuable feedback (especially when designing the next iteration of a title). Trusted players who give consistent feedback become great candidates to participate in beta programs—they might even develop into Community Leaders. These are typically the members who are somewhat computer adept and understand the differences between game bugs and game features.
- *A Way to Get the Word Out*—Having a two-hour downtime on your network is not fun for your users, especially when they are unaware it is coming. A forum allows you to give them fair warning. Other announcements like game launches, contests, and company changes are perfect for the message boards.

There are several free or inexpensive message board solutions out there. Here are a couple to consider:

- *phpBB (www.phpbb.com)*—The number one and most widely used open source (free) forum software. It is continually updated and more feature-rich than most message board software.
- *Boards2go (www.boards2go.com)*—Their free, hosted install shows ads unless you pay a small fee to get rid of them. A good, quick solution.

Other sites, like PlayFirst, have elected to build and maintain their own boards. This is a sound strategy if you have the engineering resources to update and maintain the boards. It gives you the ultimate control over your boards, especially if you are integrating your boards

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with other company applications like a profile system or account database.

Step 2: Develop a Community Leaders Program

Most well-run, community-rich sites have a small segment of the population that the rest of the community looks to for guidance and help. These Community Leaders are typically members who have been with the site for a long time and are trusted by the site owners and community to give advice or help with issues. These volunteers give hundreds of hours each year for very little or no pay. Why do Community Leaders do it? Typically for recognition and the feeling of ownership in the site or products they are representing.

To start a Community Leaders program, you must first define why you want Community Leaders. What are their duties? Will they be moderating message boards? Helping new players? Evaluating community-created content? You shouldn't consider building a program until you can answer these questions and articulate exactly what you expect of Community Leaders.

A big note of caution here: While still legally murky, using volunteers can get a company in trouble if the distinction between a paid employee and a volunteer becomes blurred. EA was successfully sued by a group of *Ultima Online* volunteers who were being given strict hours to work and other employee-like guidelines. The lesson is to be careful of what you ask of your volunteers. If you are planning on giving your volunteers stringent hours to work and special powers reserved for employees, you should probably be paying them to avoid legal complications. Finally, avoid using terms like "hiring," "work," and "employee" when speaking with or about your volunteers. Those terms should be reserved for paid employees.

If you have message boards already launched, this is typically the best place to look for Community Leaders. These are the folks who have made many hundreds of posts, who own a lot of your games, and who help people on a regular basis.

If you don't yet have message boards, I would suggest a promotion on your website asking for volunteers. Typically you will get a great response to this but will have to separate out the users who think they are signing up for free games from the ones who really want to help. The best way to ensure that you are signing up the right person is through a questionnaire that asks what their favorite games are, when they can be available to help, and what type of system and connection they have.

You also will need someone to coordinate the volunteers. Because this person typically works defined hours each week and reports to someone in the company, I suggest a contract Community Manager. This person works from home, manages your volunteer policies, and resolves disputes. Moving this grunt work off an in-house employee is the most cost-effective way to ensure that you have a smoothly-running program.

Step 3: Develop Player Profiles

Once you have a way for people to communicate and a set of leaders within your community, the next step is to help your community members maintain their unique identities through Player Profiles. A profile might merely be a simple list of info about a person (like name, age, and gender). Alternatively, you can build something more complex, including what games they are playing, when they play, and awards and ratings for each game. The user should be allowed to classify all of the profile data (except username) as Public or Private.

Regardless of the data presented, a player profile allows your community members to more easily develop relationships with others who have similar interests. It will be up to you to develop the tools to allow your members to make these connections. Some of the best tools for enabling community connections are:

- Friends Lists which allow users to add and remove friends they encounter on the site or in your games. Ensure that, as your community members are adding friends, there is reciprocation on the other side. People should not be able to add each other without agreement from both sides.
- A "Friend Finder" tool that allows users to put in certain criteria and have it spit out a list of compatible folks. Some of the criteria might be types of games played or where they live.
- "Show Random Profile" button. Becoming more popular on social network sites, this button allows users to randomly explore other users on the site—with the hope of finding others with similar interest.

Is That It?

No! The above steps only scratch the surface of building a community for your site and games. If you are thinking of building a community I would highly suggest spending a day exploring competitive sites in order to find some features that best meet your needs and budget.

Nathan Fahrenthold is a seasoned game industry professional with 10+ years designing community and online game features. As Executive Producer at HearMe he ran a large game fan site network and managed the web properties for Mplayer.com, an early online game service. As Senior Community Manager at Electronic Arts, Nathan managed the community for the best-selling console game of all time, *Madden NFL Football*. Nathan is now a Senior Producer at iWin, building community features for their single and multiplayer games. He can be reached at nathan.fahrenthold@casualconnect.org.

Confessions of an Independent Game Developer

(Or of Five, to Be Specific)

Have you ever been tempted to start your own business and be your own boss? Well, these guys have actually done it. We talked to five developers to find out what it takes to start an independent game studio. Here's what they told us. – ed.

HipSoft

- Founded: 2002
- Key Titles: *Build-a-lot 1 & 2, Flip Words 1 & 2, Gem Shop, Ocean Express, Puzzle Express*
- Key Members: Bryan Bouwman, Brian Goble, Garrett Price
- Full-time Employees: 4

What made you decide to start your own studio?

Brian Goble: HipSoft is actually the second studio I've co-founded. The first one, Monolith Productions, was (and still is) a success, but it also helped me to see what I really wanted in a company. The bigger Monolith grew, the more I longed to be part of a smaller company. The more big 3D games we made, the more I missed making smaller 2D games. Fortunately, Monolith was involved with the RealArcade project when it first began at RealNetworks so I was able to get some early exposure to this new "casual games" market. It looked interesting, and I saw the opportunity to start a new, smaller company—so Garrett Price, Bryan Bouwman, and I went for it (again!) in late 2002.

Since it has been around since 2002, HipSoft is a senior company in the casual games space. Is it hard coming up with new ideas and keeping things fresh after six years of business?

Goble: Coming up with "starter" ideas has always been easy. Coming up with an idea that can support the development of a full game, that can be completed within time and budget restrictions, and that people will be willing to pay for—that can be tricky. Before starting on Build-a-lot, we spent about three months prototyping other game ideas that all ran into dead ends. In our experience, the more games you make, the more quickly you can poke holes in new ideas.

Build-a-lot is a fantastic title—one of the Top 10 Games of 2007. Can you provide some insight into the game's conception?

Goble: Garrett Price's wife used to enjoy playing Warcarft 2. She loved constructing her base and managing resources. However, as soon as the Orcs came and the fighting started, she would stop playing—she hated the fighting aspect of the game. This led us to long discussions regarding a real-time strategy game without fighting. The real estate theme seemed to be a perfect fit as well. However, we knew the key was to keep it simple so the casual audience could get into the game quickly and have fun without feeling overwhelmed. We eventually created a rough (but playable) prototype and knew we were on to something big.

Excluding your own titles, what is your favorite casual game?

Goble: I tend to "sample" casual games and not really get into them too deeply (mainly due to time constraints—I mostly end up playing Wii games with my kids). Games I played through the trial recently include Fairway Solitaire and Puzzle Quest. I also recently got hooked on a little flash game called Castle Wars.

> "Coming up with "starter" ideas has always been easy. Coming up with an idea that can support the development of a full game, that can be completed within time and budget restrictions, and that people will be willing to pay for—that can be tricky."

Brian Goble

Andrew Lum

Andrew Lum

Having been in the casual games business for six years, no doubt you've learned a lot. If you could do any one thing differently what would it be?

Goble: In our early years, our tolerance for risk was relatively low. In hindsight, I think we could have taken larger risks on game ideas we thought were too complex at the time. Of course, that is easy to say now.

Fugazo

- Founded: 2007
- Key Titles: *Fashion Fits, Cooking Academy, World Mosaics*
- Key Members: Andrew Lum, Jonah Cohen, Matt Hayhurst
- Full-time Employees: 4

What made you decide to start your own studio?

Andrew Lum: I started in the casual games space in 2004 when I joined Sandlot Games as a QA Manager. Shortly after I started designing instead of testing, and in 2006 I designed Cake Mania. I took a short break from casual games and joined a company making Nintendo DS games. When I decided to get back into casual games I thought about the timing. "I'm unmarried and I don't have any kids." If I was ever going to start a game studio, that was the time—while my financial obligations were still low.

You started Fugazo in October 2007. How has the first year gone so far? Has it met your expectations?

Lum: Having designed the best-selling casual game of 2006 (Cake Mania) while at Sandlot Games, I was overly optimistic about Fugazo's

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(Or of Five, to Be Specific)

first year. Our first two titles—Fashion Fits and Cooking Academy—have certainly been successful, but there's definitely more competition than there was in 2006. While it's not really any more difficult now to hit the Top 10 charts with a good game, it's certainly harder to stay there than it used to be.

As a new company, has it been difficult getting direct deals with distributors?

Lum: For the most part it hasn't been that difficult. However, it does take a lot of upfront time to go over contracts with two dozen different companies. We did find that releasing our second game was significantly easier than the first since the contracts were already in place.

Excluding your own titles, what is your favorite casual game?

Lum: If you had asked me this question in 2004 or 2005, my answer would have been Diner Dash. I put over 40 hours of play into the original game, and I was never able to unlock the final restaurant. However, at this point I would have to say my favorite is Build-a-lot. I've never been into real-time strategy games such as Starcraft or Warcraft, but I was hooked by Build-a-lot's intuitive tab UI and objective-based levels.

Fugazo is a young company. Still, if you could do one thing differently, what would it be?

> If my cost of living had been lower I would have felt more comfortable taking design risks on our early titles.

Lum: To be honest, the only thing I would have changed is my lifestyle. I purchased a condo a few years before starting Fugazo, and it was a bit stressful having a mortgage during Fugazo's first few months before I started collecting an income. I feel that if my cost of living had been lower I would have felt more comfortable taking design risks on our early titles.

Last Day of Work

- Founded: 2002
- Key Titles: *Virtual Villager Series, Fish Tycoon, Plant Tycoon*
- Key Members: Arthur Humphrey and Carla Humphrey
- Full-time Employees: 3

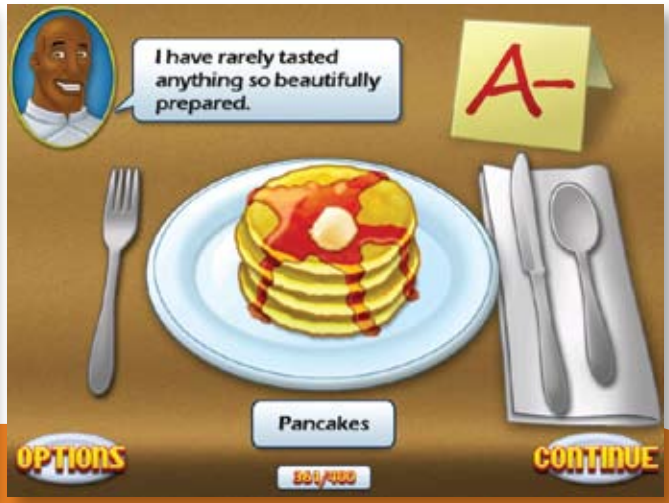
What made you decide to start your own studio?

Arthur Humphrey: I remember sitting in on a GDC session several years ago about starting your own studio. The panel was very negative, and the takeaway was essentially: "It's too late. The door is closed. Don't bother trying." The audience's reaction was actually fairly hostile because those in attendance wanted to be motivated, not discouraged. This was around the time that the controversial indie games developer/evangelist Steve Pavlina was also at GDC, preaching that anyone could make a living creating and digitally-distributing their own games. Nothing gets me going more than someone telling me I can't do something when, in fact, I know it is possible.

Last Day of Work started as a Pocket PC\Palm Developer. Why did you decide to go into PC casual gaming instead? Do you feel that your studio has inherent strengths from starting as a Pocket PC\Palm Developer?

Humphrey: On Palm/PDA/Smartphones I was able to be a one-man-show. I designed the game. I did the programming. I did the art. I did some of the music. I wrote the manual. This was because I had zero budget to pay any employees. Looking back, this is an ideal way to start a game studio. There is no part of the process that I have not had to do for myself. This gives me an understanding of all the cascading side-effects of every feature that makes it into the design, from the engineering and time cost right down to the marketability and communication impact of that feature.

Are you planning on expanding Last Day of Work? Releasing more games? What is your growth strategy?



Humphrey: In the past we have tried to grow LDW in the traditional sense and learned some interesting lessons. Some people argue that you can scale a business in a variety of ways, but you can't scale creativity. We have found this to be true. Our attempts to scale into concurrent game development resulted in a troubling loss of efficiency and quality, and we found ourselves folding teams together back into a single project. Yes, of course you need to hire talented producers and game designers, but our games really come from a single vision—and scaling that is precipitous at best. Instead we have acquiesced to making one game at a time, and now our expansion and growth is directed towards making these games deeper and more difficult to clone. We are also expanding growth on our business side in a few different ways.

Excluding your own titles what is your favorite casual game?

Humphrey: After a brutal three-month crunch period on our last release, I've finally been able to catch up and play some Rock Band, which is a masterful casual game. In the download try/buy space there is a very indie-at-heart team over at Reflexive and I find myself enjoying their titles like Wik and The Great Tree. My tastes in games are pretty broad and run from very casual to very core. I have almost certainly played Super Granny and Bioshock in the same day.

LDW has been making casual handheld games since 2003 and casual PC games since 2006. If you could do one thing differently what would it be?

Humphrey: The escalation of production costs for us has been too fast. Fish Tycoon did amazingly well and cost a fraction of what our recent launches have cost. The natural stifling of innovation that comes with increased budgets is the worst part. If I could go back, I would slow that down. In the meantime, we are looking for ways to simplify the games' designs, the UI, and the framework and trying to get back to the basics wherever possible. I don't think that you need to spend a million dollars to make a hit casual game.

Arthur Humphrey

Jenny Martin

Michael Thornton Wyman

GoBit Games

- Founded: 2007
- Key Titles: *Burger Shop*
- Key Members: Jenny Martin, Don Walters, Brian Rothstein
- Full-time Employees: 3

What made you decide to start your own studio?

Jenny Martin: My partners and I decided to start GoBit because we had the right talent in place and several solid prototypes that we felt were strong enough to enter the already-crowded landscape of casual games. I had been working in educational game development and was looking forward to working on games I love to play.

Go Bit was just formed in 2007. How did the first year go? Did it meet your expectations?

Martin: Our first year was exciting and intense. As a self-funded studio, we were acutely aware of time and budget, but our number one goal was to make Burger Shop a great game with very high production values. A few surprises along the way made it interesting. For instance, we all thought writing the story for the game would be a snap. It turned out to take a tremendous amount of time to decide the direction of the story.

As a new company, has it been difficult getting direct deals with distributors?

Martin: Actually, no. Some contracts did take longer to negotiate than others (I think that's due to the large number of developers in the space), but in the end we were able to sign deals with everyone.

Excluding your own titles, what is your favorite casual game?

Martin: I love time management and hidden object games. My favorites right now are Airplane Mania (cute!) and Wedding Dash. In the hidden object genre, I love Madame Fate and Cate West. I also really enjoyed DragonStone (and still do).

GoBit is a relatively new company. Still if you could do one thing differently what would it be?

Martin: I suppose it would be to gather our team together more often. I work virtually in California and GoBit is based in Seattle. As a virtual company, it's easy to rely on email and IM, but we work hard to communicate via phone every day.

> "In our early years, our tolerance for risk was relatively low. In hindsight, I think we could have taken larger risks on game ideas we thought were too complex at the time."

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> We're having a blast, and since we're a virtual studio it works really well from a lifestyle standpoint, but the harsh reality is that each of us individually is fairly senior and could be making a lot more money contracting or working for a larger company.

Big Splash Games

- Founded: 2006
- Key Titles: *Chocolatier, Chocolatier 2:Secret Ingredients*
- Key Members: Michael Thornton Wyman, Jonathan Blossom, Stephen B. Lewis
- Full-time Employees: 3

What made you decide to start your own studio?

Michael Thornton Wyman: For me, the decision to start Big Splash Games was more opportunistic than anything else. Throughout my career I'd always had in the back of my mind that I might want to start my own company some day. And like many people (everyone?), as I worked at various companies I would file away certain exceptional people I got to know, thinking, "If I ever started my own studio, I'd want to work with that person." When I relocated to Tucson, Arizona—where my wife got a tenure-track academic job (with good benefits)—I couldn't think of a better time to give it a try. And so I called a couple of "those people" from my years in the game industry, my partners Jon Blossom and Stephen B. Lewis, and they happened to be available and interested in putting something together. That's how Big Splash Games was formed.

Big Splash's first two games were published by PlayFirst. What was it like working with a Publisher?

Wyman: PlayFirst has been a great partner for us. They have really believed in us and trusted us every step of the way. I should say that I had worked with several PlayFirst folks at previous companies, so it wasn't like a blind date or anything. But I guess based on my track record and the strength of the team I had put together, they really let us run with the ball. Also, since they funded us on concept, the arrangement allowed us to get the company up and running and focus on creative implementation, which is really what I feel we do best. They also provided just the right amount of guidance, particularly around formal user testing, which helped us tweak and tune the first two Chocolatiers and make them much better games. Like anything, it depends on the publisher, what you are looking to get out of the deal, and the specific people involved. But PlayFirst has been terrific for us.

Are you planning on self-publishing any of your upcoming titles?

Wyman: Yes. We are working on another project with PlayFirst, but we are also working on a new IP, which we are really excited about. Essentially we're trying to take it as far as we can ourselves without taking any money upfront. Hopefully that will mean getting across the finish line and publishing the game ourselves. At the end of the day, unless you have a Diner Dash-sized hit, it's really hard to make enough money in this space right now, at least for a three-way partnership. We're having a blast, and since we're a virtual studio it works really well from a lifestyle standpoint, but the harsh reality is that each of us individually is fairly senior and could be making a lot more money contracting or working for a larger company. That's just the reality we face, and our games have done really well. So, we're not sure that it's a viable long-term business strategy to exist as a work-for-hire studio. We'd like to publish our next title and hopefully take the company to the next level.

Excluding your own titles, what is your favorite casual game?

Wyman: I try to look at everything that either strikes my interest or reaches the Top Ten. Maybe it's because I see so many games, but I'm all about polish these days. I tend to really love PopCap games, and Feeding Frenzy and Peggle still stand out as two of my all-time favorites. Both Build-a-lots are great games, too. In general, I feel the quality bar for casual games keeps getting raised, which is a good thing.

If you were to form a casual games studio today, what would you do differently?

Wyman: Well, the great thing about being a start-up is we can still do things differently! We haven't been around that long, and I feel like we're constantly evolving and looking for better ways to do things, or better tools, or what-have-you. So I'm not sure there is anything I would point to and say I'd do differently at this point.

The Keys to Audio Excellence

Producing Top Soundtracks for Casual Games

Kane Minkus

One of the most valuable tools a producer uses to make a hit game is the audio production. Because of its potential impact on the user, audio promises one of the highest returns for your investment dollar. Here are just a few examples of how a top-notch soundtrack can give your game a more polished and extraordinary presentation, thereby causing the sales and brand to grow:

- Builds brand stickiness by deepening the user's connection with the characters
- Provides user feedback (rewards and consequences)
- Expands the narrative
- Evokes deeper emotions and emotional connection
- Creates lasting memories (through strong and well-crafted melodies)
- Fills the game with more life
- Gives character to background and inanimate objects
- Increases the production experience

The list goes on and on.

As co-founder and executive producer of the music team at SomaTone Interactive Audio, I have worked on the soundtracks of close to 400 casual games. Because our team works on films, TV shows, advertising, interactive media, and games from all over the spectrum, we have the chance to compare the working styles and relationships of different producers in different industries. Working with hundreds of producers closely, our team has begun to observe what we believe are the patterns of a really successful project with producers—so much so, in fact, that we feel like we know from the first conversation with a producer whether the working relationship is likely to drive a great soundtrack.

The intent of this article is to share what we find to be some of the "best practices" for producers who work with audio professionals. The top producers we have worked with often come to the table with strengths in the following areas:

- *Structural Clarity* – Knowing what should go in the game and why
- *Creative Design* – A stylistic approach or vision along with interactive implementation ideas; also: the ability to articulate that vision and describe how or what the audio is supporting (narrative, characters, environment, etc)
- *Evocative Descriptions* – Good use of storytelling, metaphors, and sensory language to guide and give feedback throughout the development process
- *Production Understanding* – Understanding of the stages and steps involved in audio production
- *The Language of Audio Production* – A basic understanding of the core elements within the audio professional's toolbox
- *Budget Requirements* – A clear set of limitations and options associated with format, size, and budget
- *Value Perspective* – A recognition of the importance and value of excellent audio production (as opposed to treating the team or soundtrack like a commodity)
- *Management Process* – Ability to manage the various stages of the audio production, including in particular the feedback loop

Let's examine each of those separately:

Structural Clarity

There are usually two ways to work with an audio developer to determine what audio should go in your game: 1) Ask the audio developer to review the game and recommend what should go in it; 2) Have a complete, laid out structure for the audio in the game before presenting it to the audio developer.

In our experience, the best soundtracks typically come from structural planning by the game designer. Although audio developers can be a valuable resource to give you feedback on your structure or to build upon it, it is often a lost cause to have the audio developer come up with the structure and concept.

"Because of its potential impact on the user, audio promises one of the highest returns for your investment dollar."

One of the most valuable services your audio developer can provide is perspective. For example, the audio developer might suggest ideas that have worked well in other games or ways to save you time and money. However, it is far more valuable to ask your audio developer for feedback or to require that they "work within the limits" than to give them limitless reign over designing the audio landscape.

Why? Well, for starters, no one knows your product better than you do. No one is more familiar than you with the story, the characters, the market, the financial model, and the goals for the game. Asking the audio developer to determine what assets should be in your game is a real challenge, especially considering that the game is often not finished before the audio team begins production. Besides, the audio professional has a vested interest, both financially and creatively, to put more audio into your game than you might.

One of the first steps to a successful start with your audio developer is creating a structure for where you want music cues or musical stings, which events need sound effects (or which scenes need ambiences), and which characters need voice-over.

Often, the structure can (and should) be heavily influenced by the game-play, characters, narrative or feedback we want to give the user. Sometimes audio is used to tell the story, foreshadow future events,

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or reveal something (creating a mood). Close care can be given at this stage to how the audio will most highly impact the story and cause the user to become even more submerged into the game.

Creative Design and Evocative Descriptions

Once the audio structure is clearly defined, you can start focusing on the specific stylistic approach for your game.

Here is where some of the best producers really shine. Using reference material is a common and useful way to begin to discuss style. As a service to our clients, we have always provided temporary music that might serve as a stylistic launching point, but lately we have found that producers are showing up to creative meetings with their own reference material. Doing so gives us an opportunity to understand the producer's personal style and get inside what he or she is really thinking.

Preparing reference material is useful for a number of reasons. For starters, it causes a producer to invest some time up front into making decisions that should not be made once production is underway (like preferred instrument choices, pacing, etc.). In addition, it provides a consistent reference for later in the project in case it becomes necessary to revisit the reasons for early decisions (especially as the game evolves).

Even so, there are times when either suitable material is really hard to find or the goal is to come up with something uniquely different. But this is often the exception rather then the rule.

Let me mention here that some people (broadcast commercial producers in particular) say they don't like to define creatively what they are looking for—that they are looking for a little "magic" to suddenly show up on their desk, something they may never have even thought of. They love that experience when the audio developer gives them "something unexpected, something marvelous."

> "In most cases, those waiting for 'magic' are more likely to get dozens and dozens of submissions they hate and burn through tons of money in the process—when they could have saved a lot of time and money if they had simply found a way to articulate their creative vision."

Well, good luck with that one. We have that kind of relationship only with those producers with whom we have worked for years, producers who we know are truly open to having us take some creative risks. Such relationships work only because we have come to fully understand those producers' personalities, their approach to game design, their tastes in what they want to release. But in most cases, those waiting for "magic" are more likely to get dozens and dozens of submissions they hate and burn through tons of money in the process—when they could have saved a lot of time and money if they had simply found a way to articulate their creative vision.

We have found that the best creative conversations include what we call "evocative language." This shows up in a couple ways:

1. *Metaphors and Storytelling* – Using metaphors is a great way to discuss the ultimate experience you are striving for. We recently heard a producer describe a music cue this way: "The music for this level should sound like you are sitting out at the edge of a pond on a sunny day. The breeze is light, and the lemonade is perfect." Wow! Those few words created a vision we could quickly understand. Although each person might interpret what is needed somewhat differently, a clear metaphor goes a long way toward evoking a setting, mood, and experience that can be translated into audio.
2. *Sensory Language* – Another way to convey a creative vision is through sensory language. The more descriptive the language, the better—which is why putting together interesting words can create remarkable results: deliciously curious, rough impact, a racing darkness, flower breeze. Consider these two contrasting examples:
   - Not So Good: "It needs to be real pleasant. This sound is heard over and over again, so it needs to not get annoying to the user."
   - Much Better: "It should sound like a squishy, gooey, soupy splatter all over the freshly cleaned kitchen floor."

Describing sounds with evocative language and storytelling always improves the chances that audio developers will accurately turn your vision into sound.

Production Understanding and The Language of Audio Production

You don't have to have a good understanding of the production process for music, sound effects, or voice-overs in order to get an audio developer to start creating assets for you. However, it is extremely helpful to have such an understanding if you're interested in getting the audio assets you want! This article does not allow for a detailed discussion of the production process and the language of audio production, but here are some key phrases you should be aware of before engaging your audio team:

Production:

- Pre-production
- Audio Design Process (recording process)
- Tracks/Layers
- Loops/Samples
- Modern Audio Production Gear (often different than the *VH1 Behind The Scenes* studios!)
- Mixing (Equalization and Effects)
- Mastering

> Inasmuch as audio is one of the lowest cost parts of a game, its seems a strange area in which to cut corners.

- Formats
- Editing
- Takes

Creative Production:

- Tempos
- Melody
- Harmony
- Instrumentation
- Arrangement
- Rhythms

If you are unfamiliar with any of these terms or with the production process for music, sound effects, or voice-overs, it would be a great use of your time to sit with your audio team some time and ask about these terms and what they are doing. If you can learn to speak the language and understand the process of audio development, it will be much easier get the audio you want.

Budget Requirements and Value Perspective

One of the biggest mistakes a producer can make is to look at audio as a commodity. Pitting audio pro against audio pro to see who will come up with the cheapest price indicates a misconception about the impact that excellent audio design can have on the overall quality of a game. It's not surprising, perhaps, that over the years, most of the "lowest bidder" producers we have worked with have either gone out of business or stopped working with us. Such an attitude is a signal that the producer has failed to comprehend all of the factors that go in to making a good game great. Besides, inasmuch as audio is one of the lowest cost parts of a game, its seems a strange area in which to cut corners. We are always amazed when a producer approaches us looking for the "best deal" rather than trying to build the best game. Furthermore, the casual game industry is a small industry, and creating win/win long-term relationships with partners is really the way we have seen the winners emerge.

However, budgets can sometimes be concrete and certainly spending money on audio is a realistic cost! One of the most effective ways we have worked with producers on a budget is when they define what they have to spend, or roughly what they are comfortable spending. Sure you can conceal your budget and just ask for a quote, but if you want to work together to achieve a fair price and populate your game with audio, it works well to have a defined budget upfront. Also, many times, an audio team can suggest ways to reach your budget by reusing music, sound effects, or voice-over, or by actually reusing thematic elements. Having a defined idea of your budget and discussing that up front gives your audio developers a good structure to start creating exactly what you want. Some producers have even asked for options at different cost structures so they could decide on the small-, medium-, and large-sized structure.

Managing the Creative Process (Especially Feedback)

There are two highly important phases in audio production that can help ensure that the audio you want is the audio you will get: Pre-Production and Feedback rounds (which, ironically, are the phases that are the most costly for the audio professional). Managing the pre-production process (as discussed earlier in this article) and the feedback process will both help you save time and money and get a result closer to what you specifically want.

A common problem is feedback by committee (often associated with audio production for TV and advertising). Having multiple people at the game developer giving their opinions separately rarely works in feedback integration. An audio professional needs clear, concise direction and feedback at all times. This means that if the game developer is set on having many people comment on the audio, there needs to be one producer that filters and distills the notes into non-conflicting, actionable feedback.

One final word of caution: Always make sure you review the audio in the context of the game. It is not uncommon for producers to ask for a bunch of changes after listening to the audio without actually playing the game. Not surprisingly, once the sound is put it into the game and the producers can see why we made certain choices, they ask us to reverse those changes.

Providing very specific, actionable direction goes a long way toward getting what you want in your audio.

Conclusion

We hope these "Best Practices" will strengthen your approach to game audio and help you work more effectively with your audio teams. By applying these practices, we are certain you will notice immediate improvement in the connection between what you want and what you get with your audio. Remember, ultimately a better soundtrack means happier users and higher sales.

Kane Minkus is one of the founding partners of SomaTone Interactive Audio, a leading audio production firm for the Video Game, Interactive Multimedia, Advertising, Film and Mobile Industries. SomaTone, which is based in San Francisco, also maintains studios in LA, Munich, and Beijing. Kane can be reached at kane.minkus@casualconnect.org

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The Voice of the Game

A Look Back at the Audio Track—Casual Connect Europe 2008

Greg Rahn

February's Casual Connect Conference in Amsterdam featured something new: The first ever Casual Connect Audio Track. The presentations—designed for audio and non-audio people alike—were led by three industry veterans who share a passion for audio: Matthew Lee Johnston from PopCap, Kane Minkus from SomaTone Interactive Audio, and me. Between us, we have created audio for hundreds of casual games. Appropriately enough, the sessions were held at the Felix Meritis, built in 1777 by the citizens of Amsterdam for the advancement of arts and sciences. It was a fitting setting for a new engagement with challenging ideas.

First up was audio veteran Matthew Lee Johnston, who among various other achievements once had the ominous task of hiring and supervising composer Danny Elfman for a Microsoft game he worked on. Matthew opened the session with a rousing discussion about deliberate audio design and the use of audio to communicate critical information to the end user. For instance, he told of one example in which developers had to find a way to warn pedestrians of an oncoming vehicle—the problem being that it was a "way too quiet" electric car. In order to keep pedestrians from being run over, they had the car emanate the sound of a horse drawn carriage. Likewise you'll find that the pterodactyl sound in Joust cues the player to "get his (butt) in gear," and the coin sound in Zuma draws the player's attention to activity happening outside the shooting zone. Matthew stressed that audio is the voice of the game and that well designed audio should help the player win. The implication, of course, is that playing a game with the sound off (we've all done it) should leave you at a significant disadvantage—and if it doesn't, then the game has poor audio design. He then demonstrated to the audience that they could successfully identify popular games after simply hearing the audio—without any visual cues. Such games provided good examples of "iconic" audio.

In my session I focused on using ambient soundscapes to aid in immersing the player in the world of the game. This is an area in which casual games have a unique opportunity to engage the end user. I showed a graphic of a game set in an old mine, complete with heavy wooden support beams, a rail car, various mining tools, and a tunnel. I then went through the steps you would go through to create the ambient sounds to fit the sonic "world" of that game. In the first step, you would gather source sound material. You might, for example, hike to an actual gold mine to record the ambient sound, or go to an amusement park and record a rollercoaster to get the sound of a rail car on steel tracks. In the next step, you would process and enhance these source sounds in the studio to make them larger than life. The third step would involve implementing these sounds into the game by randomly playing them at various time intervals in order to create a constantly evolving soundscape. To illustrate the final result, I played a 30 second sample of the final soundscape that might accompany the background graphic on the screen.

Another part of my session involved audience participation. I played a variety of short audio clips—under two seconds each—and got initial reactions from the audience. For example, after playing a clip of a man's voice saying the word "Afghanistan" one audience member responded with "liar," another responded with "politician" (to which the first replied "didn't I already say that?"). The point I was illustrating was that humans will react to even the briefest of audio stimulus due to our experiences in this multimedia world. Reactions may differ, however, depending on the life experiences of the individual. When approaching game audio design, we need to ask ourselves: "How does this particular group of end users respond to certain audio stimuli? What responses are we trying to evoke?"

Kane Minkus then provided a framework for managing the creative process. He pointed out that some people prefer the initial creation of ideas while others prefer developing those ideas—and still others prefer polishing those ideas into a final product. To illustrate that point, he divided the audience into groups and assigned them various stages in the creative cycle in order to take a game idea through those various stages. The first group handled the incubation stage by coming up with a game idea. The second group began to tinker with that idea—what Kane called the inspiration stage. The next group handled the perspiration stage by hammering out the details. Next was the polishing stage in which they refined the game idea and incorporated feedback. The final stage would be the integration stage during which the game becomes a reality by being released. In the course of that exercise, Kane helped audience members discover their natural strengths (and weaknesses) within the creative cycle, and it soon became clear that splitting up the creative workload according to people's creative strengths can prove to be very efficient. Kane pointed out that this system can be applied to managing anything that has a creative process, including

The Voice of the Game

A Look Back at the Audio Track—Casual Connect Europe 2008

cooking, painting, brainstorming, writing—even having a conversation. In truth, most everything in life requires some sort of processed creativity.

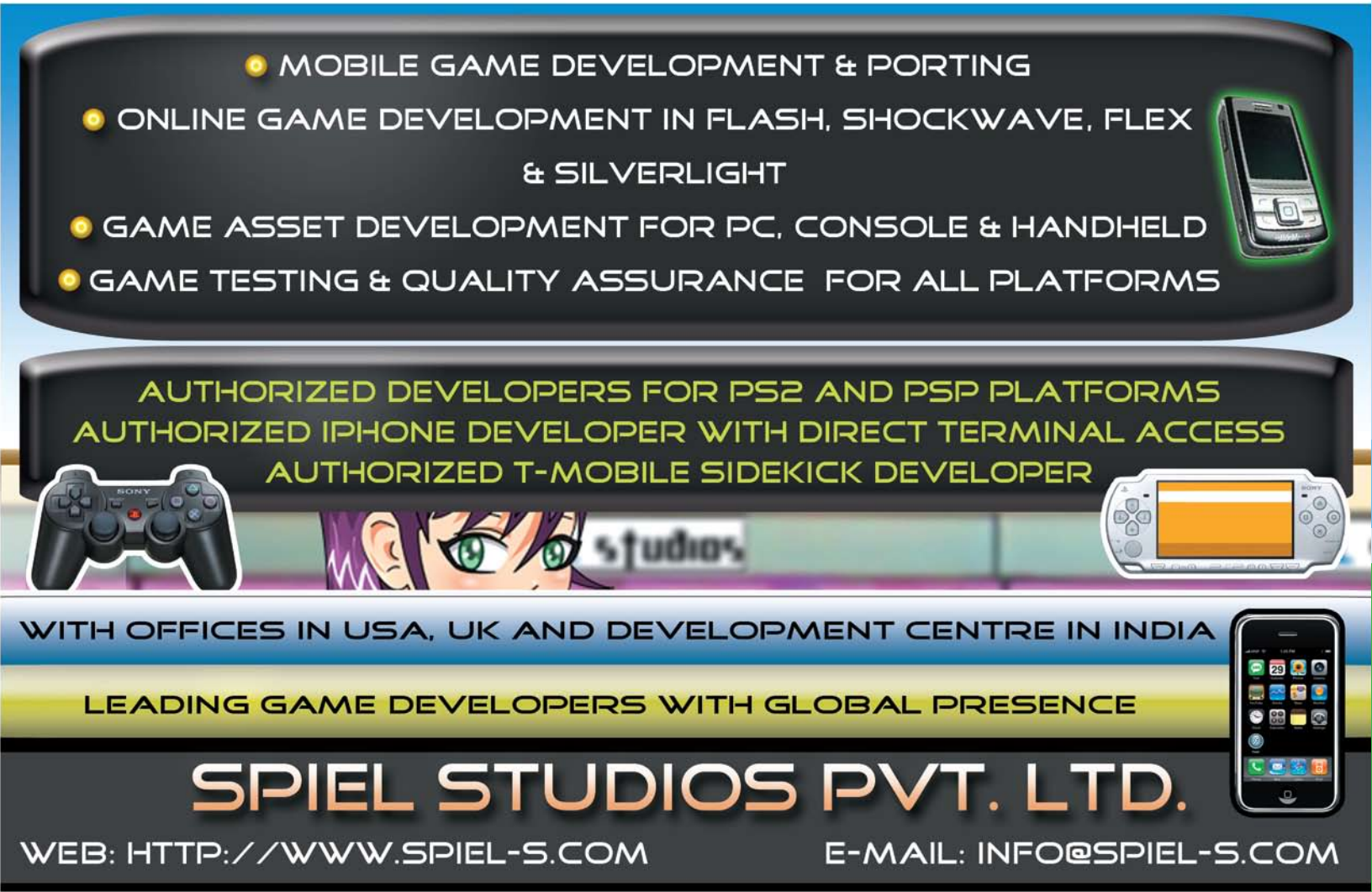
Q&A

The question-and-answer period of the session was especially engaging. Here's small sample of the things we discussed:

- *How does an audio provider deal with a client who is requesting audio that is just plain off the mark?* Communicating with the client and using examples to back up your differing points of view usually results in one party being swayed and ultimately a meeting of the minds. Because numerous revisions can be especially expensive, it's important to have plenty of discussion up front before starting production.
- *How early in the development process should a developer start thinking about audio?* It makes sense to talk with your sound guy from the very beginning, even if the sound work won't actually begin until later in the development schedule. . Remember that creative redesign is a reality, and the audio team can help guide this process.

One attendee summarized the essence of the first-ever Casual Connect Audio Track: "I do believe that a lot developers out there are so caught up with game-play and graphics that they sort of take sound for granted and either leave it to the end or [simply] throw in an under-produced . . . sound element. . . . Engaging the player through the mind, sight, and sound is super important to [immerse] the player into the ambience of the game and make him/her feel like he's/she's part of that experience."

Greg Rahn has been composing music and sound for interactive games since 1994. In the casual games genre, he has provided audio for over 80 titles including such hits as Kongai, Family Feud Online Party, The Poppit Show, Jewel Quest Solitaire, Word Riot, and Casino Island. Other notable titles include Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks The 80's, Splinter Cell Double Agent, Carmen Sandiego and Riven. His soundtracks have been honored with various industry awards. As a recording studio musician, Greg provided keyboard session work on spots for Huggies, Hershey's, and Rice a Roni. and has performed with a diverse range of artists from Latin jazz great Pete Escovedo to rock guitar legend Ronnie Montrose. Greg can be reached at greg.rahn@casualconnect.org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